

# THE AMERICAN REVIEW

1/1989

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THE VISION OF AUGUST WILSON

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CORPORATION AND NATION

By Robert Reich

A NEW ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC

By Frederick Turner

PLAGUES, AIDS AND HISTORY

By Robert Swenson

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# Jasper Johns in Venice

Jasper Johns is widely hailed as the most important American artist of the last 30 years, and the exhibit of his paintings at the 1988 Venice Biennale confirms that reputation. Artists from 45 countries were represented at the Biennale—the world’s oldest and largest exhibition of new art—where Johns was awarded the top prize. Johns is considered the father of pop art for his deadpan paintings of commonplace objects, yet his recent works are more autobiographical. “The Seasons” (below), a four-part work shown in Venice, depicts the artist’s passage through time. In these paintings Johns himself appears as a shadowy apparition, and he includes an American flag, the Mona Lisa and other iconography from earlier art.



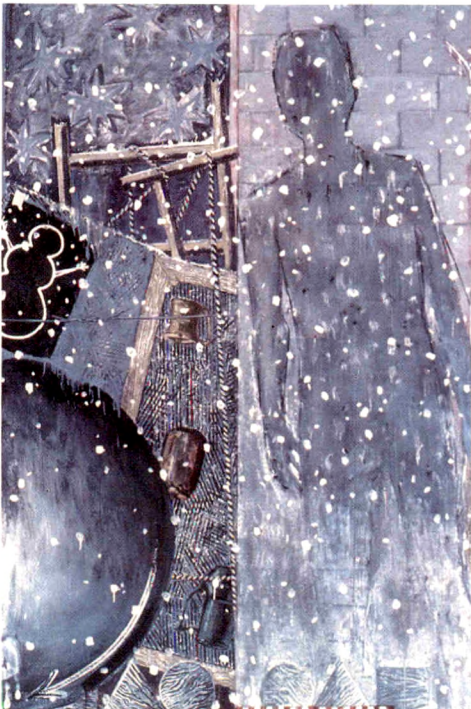
"Spring," 1986



"Summer," 1985



"Fall," 1986



"Winter," 1986

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COVER: Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson. See article page 48. Photograph © 1986 David Burnett/Contact Press Images.

© 1988 Jasper Johns, courtesy of the Leo Castelli Gallery, New York. Each work is encaustic on canvas, 190.5 x 127 cm.



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# CORPORATION AND NATION

By Robert B. Reich

Should corporations be bound to their nations' interests, and if so, how?

*Until recently, it was generally assumed that what was good for a country's largest corporations was also good for that nation's economy. In the last few years, however, relationships among shareholders, corporations and the individual nation have changed. Multinational corporations now operate in a global arena—manufacturing as well as selling their products around the world. As a result, the relationship between the success of a specific business and its country's prosperity is much less obvious.*

*In this article, economist Robert Reich asks whether corporation and nation should be bound and if so, how? Although Reich is concerned chiefly with the United States, his insights apply to other market economies as well. "The struggle to define a new relationship between corporation and nation," he writes, "will be one of the central economic and political tasks of our era, and it will defy easy solutions." One first step he proposes is that government policy makers focus on what they want corporations to do—for example, training workers in new skills—and provide inducements to do them.*

*Robert B. Reich teaches political economy and management at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. His articles on economic policy and public administration have been published in The New York Times, The New Republic and The Atlantic. His most recent books are Tales of a New America and The Power of Public Ideas.*



If the corporations Americans own and work for succeed, the American economy will too—or so we were brought up to believe. This assumption was given its most brazen expression 35 years ago, by Charles Erwin Wilson, who was then the president of General Motors; he was nicknamed "Engine Charlie" in order to

distinguish him from another Charles E. Wilson, "Electric Charlie," who was the president of General Electric through the 1940s. During the Senate hearing on his confirmation as Eisenhower's nominee for secretary of defense, Wilson was asked whether he could make a decision in the interests of the United States that was adverse to the interests of General Motors's shareholders. Wilson said that he could, but that such a conflict would probably never arise. "I cannot conceive of one because for years I thought what was good for our country was good for General Motors, and vice versa. The difference did not exist."

Engine Charlie's statement was widely criticized at the time as an example of corporate America's arrogance, but in fact it simply expressed principles already codified in American law and policy: the corporation existed for its shareholders, and as they prospered, so would the nation.

This root principle of American political economy is no longer valid. The corporations Americans own and work for are becoming disconnected from the national economy. The overall success of these corporations has less and less to do with America's continued growth and prosperity. Corporation and nation are growing apart, and American law and politics must adapt to this new reality.

When Engine Charlie uttered his dictum, it was easy to believe that what was good for corporations and their shareholders was also good for the na-

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tional economy. At least, shareholders' interests were not so narrowly defined as to seem inconsistent with the nation's broader economic objectives. Shareholders were typically too widely dispersed to exert any real control over the corporation. Most shareholders faithfully held on to their shares, treating them as long-term investments, and trusting that share values would continue to rise over time.

Top corporate executives thus enjoyed wide discretion to do whatever they pleased, including what they deemed to be socially responsible, as long as their expenditures could be justified as benefiting shareholders over the long term. This rationalization was capacious enough to encompass almost any activities that might improve the corporation's image. In fact, some of the expenditures they made—on basic research, the development of new products and technologies, employee training, various educational and philanthropic activities—had little positive effect on the corporation's bottom line, because the new knowledge easily spread to other firms. But these activities did help spur broader economic development within the regions the corporations inhabited. And many of the executives relished the role of the "corporate statesman" who mobilized private resources for further public gains.

In the past few years, however, the stock market has become far more efficient at keeping the executives' attention fixed on the bottom line. First, the dispersed individual shareholders of yore have largely been replaced by a relatively few professional investment managers, who are responsible for investing enough millions of dollars of pension funds, mutual funds and insurance funds to make up at least a third of all the equity in corporate America. These investment managers are responsible for some 70 percent of the trading on the New York Stock Exchange. They compete against one another, and are quick to shift funds from one corporation to

another, depending on whose share prices are rising or falling at the moment. Second, the deregulation of brokerage fees and new technologies linking computers to trading floors have reduced the costs and increased the speed of such transactions; the computer linkages also give investment managers up-to-the-minute data on share prices. Third, financial entrepreneurs have refined techniques for acquiring controlling blocks of shares, sometimes even using the corporation's own assets as collateral. Because of these three developments, it has become relatively easy for an aggressive company or a few audacious individuals to seize control of even the largest of American corporations when they sense a failure by the corporation's executives to exploit some opportunity for increasing the value of their shares.

To deter raiders, every major American corporation is busily "restructuring" itself, to use the Wall Street euphemism. This has required eliminating or drastically cutting back on discretionary spending. Executives no longer argue that what is good for shareholders is necessarily good for the nation. In fact, many are now insisting that the stock market's unrelenting demand for higher share value is actually harmful to the nation, and that raiders should be restrained.

What may have escaped notice by business leaders is the logical consequence of their new argument. One of the great advantages of the Engine Charlie principle to American business was its implicit rejection of any formal means of holding corporations accountable for the nation's continued prosperity. In benefiting shareholders, the corporation would necessarily spur the economy forward. But once it is granted, even by business leaders, that this is not always the case—indeed, that too much attention to shareholders' demands may in fact detract from the nation's long-term vitality—then the presumptive link between corporate executives' responsibilities to their shareholders and to the nation is severed. What is good for the shareholders is not necessarily good for the nation.

The question that in Engine Charlie's day had been submerged under the vague rubric of "long-term"

shareholder interests thus arises: by what means should corporations be held accountable to the public for contributing to the nation's prosperity?

## FOREIGN CAPITAL, U.S. COMPANIES

As ever more of corporate America is bought by foreign nationals, another divergence appears between the interests of the corporation and its shareholders and the interests of the nation. In Engine Charlie's time virtually all major corporations doing business in America were owned by Americans. Thirty years later this situation has changed. Other national economies are catching up with that of the United States; a few are on the verge of surpassing it. American-owned corporations are no longer the only global enterprises of significant power and scale, nor even the largest ones. And in a historic reverse, foreign ownership of American capital now stands at over \$200,000 million, more than double what it was in 1980, and it is rising rapidly.

The low dollar has made bargains of American corporations, as if corporate America were having a fire sale, with every company marked 35 to 50 percent off its regular price. Foreign capital is also pouring into the American stock market, the crash of October 1987 notwithstanding. Indeed, the tenacity of foreign investors prevented the Dow Jones Industrial Average from falling even further. Major banks and investment houses are now partly owned by foreign banks intent on breaking into the American financial market.

The wave of foreign acquisition of corporate America is having an effect in the United States similar to that felt in other nations when they faced American investment years ago—when charges of American "imperialism" were in the air and fears that American multinational corporations would exploit host nations were acute. American business leaders, although delighted to have foreign investors bid up the prices of their own



shares, have expressed mounting concern about the number of foreign-owned corporations popping up in their midst.

Here, too, the implication is that the interests of the shareholders of the corporations are no longer the same as the nation's. In this instance, it is not enough that a corporation produces goods and services within the United States and employs American workers. To guarantee that corporate success will translate into national success, the corporation must also be firmly under the control of American citizens—so the argument goes. American shareholders and executives, it is assumed, can be trusted to act in the nation's interest under circumstances in which foreign shareholders and executives cannot be trusted. But a step is missing from this argument, just as a step was missing from the previous argument, that corporations protected from takeovers will act in the long-term interest of the economy. Here the unanswered question is, Why and under what circumstances should citizens of the United States (or any of the other industrial democracies) be expected to forgo profits in pursuit of national goals?

### COMPETING FOR PLANTS AND JOBS

In Engine Charlie's time almost everything that American-owned corporations sold at home or abroad—particularly anything involving the slightest complexity in design or manufacturing—was produced in the United States. This is no longer the case. American-owned corporations are now doing all sorts of technologically sophisticated work outside the United States. A significant proportion of America's current trade imbalance is due to this tendency.

Look closely at almost any major American corporation that sells complex gadgets and you are likely to see a foreign producer in disguise: in 1986 IBM imported \$1500 million worth of data-processing equipment and General Electric \$500 million worth of cassette recorders, microwave ovens, room air-conditioners and telephones. Apple Computer's Asian plants make all Apple II computers, which in 1986 accounted for more than half of the company's sales. East-

man Kodak now sells, under its own name, Canon photocopiers, Matsushita video cameras and TDK videotape, and it has farmed out the production of its 35-millimeter cameras to Haking Industries in Hong Kong, and Chinon Industries in Japan. And so on.

All such goods that American corporations buy or make abroad and then sell in the United States are counted as American imports. The current frenzy in Washington over allegedly unfair foreign trade practices has obscured this reality. Consider Taiwan, which annually exports some \$19,000 million more to the United States than it imports from the United States. The imbalance has provoked the indignation of American politicians, some of whom are demanding that Taiwan take steps to improve the balance or incur stiff penalties. But on closer examination the real culprit emerges. Several of Taiwan's top exporters are American-owned corporations—RCA, Texas Instruments and General Instruments. All told, more than 30 percent of Taiwan's trade imbalance with the United States, and more than half its imbalance in high-technology goods, is attributable to American-owned corporations' buying or making things in Taiwan and exporting them back to the United States. Taiwan's only sin is to have a highly skilled population that is willing to work for relatively low wages.

Even Japan's trade surplus with the United States is in substantial part the handiwork of American-owned corporations. Fully \$17,000 million, or about 40 percent, of Japan's \$39,500 million trade surplus with the United States in 1985 (the last year for which such data are available) was the result of American corporations' buying or making things in Japan to be sold in the United States under their own brand names.

Americans continue to consume more than they produce and to import more than they export—hardly the path to prosperity. But American-owned corporations are doing quite

well, regardless. They are not only raking in nice profits by buying or making things abroad for sale here but also doing well by buying or making things abroad for sale everywhere else. In 1985 American-owned corporations sold the Japanese over \$53,000 million worth of goods that they made in Japan—a sum greater than the American trade deficit with Japan that year (Japanese companies, meanwhile, sold us only \$15,000 million worth of goods that they made in the United States). IBM Japan is huge and prosperous in its own right, with 18,000 employees, annual sales of \$6,000 million around the world, and research and production facilities that are among the most advanced anywhere.

In fact, American-owned corporations have remained competitive worldwide. A recent study by Robert Lipsey and Irving Kravis, of the National Bureau of Economic Research, suggests that while the fraction of world markets held by U.S. corporations exporting from the United States has steadily dropped during the past 25 years, such losses have been offset by the gains of American-owned corporations exporting from other nations.

One conclusion that might be drawn from all this is that America's competitive decline does not stem from any inherent deficiency in the top management of American corporations. The stream of books exhorting managers toward excellence notwithstanding, American managers have done well by their shareholders (although *not* so well by America).

In short, American corporations and their shareholders can now prosper by going wherever on the globe the costs of doing business are lowest—where wages, regulations and taxes are minimal. Indeed, managers have a responsibility to their shareholders to seek out just such business climates. If America as a whole wants to be a successful exporter, it must compete with other nations to be the location where American corporations find it profitable to set up shop.

This lesson is well understood by state governments. Consider, for example, the Hyster Company, an American-owned corporation that makes forklift trucks used to shuttle things around factories and ware-



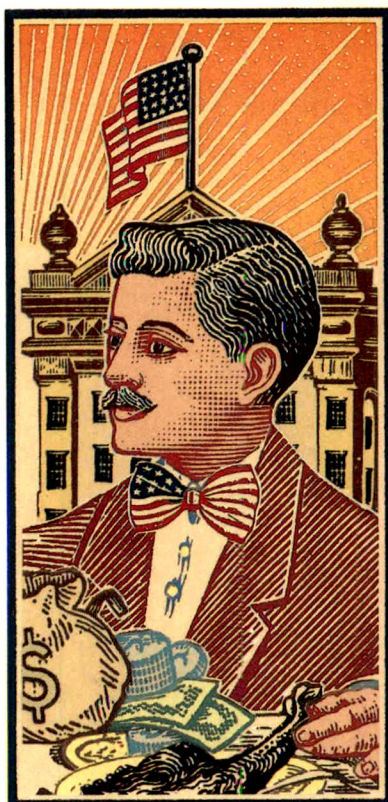
houses. In 1982 Hyster informed public officials in five states and four nations where it built trucks that some Hyster plants would close. Operations would be retained wherever they were most generously subsidized. The bidding was ferocious. Within six months Hyster had collected \$72.5 million in direct aid. Britain is reported to have offered \$20 million to ransom 1500 jobs in Irvine, Scotland. Several American towns—including Kewanee, Illinois; Sulligent, Alabama; and Berea, Kentucky—surrendered a total of \$18 million in direct grants and subsidized loans to attract or preserve around 2000 jobs.

The same underlying problem emerges. Subsidies and tax breaks are offered with no strings attached—no means of holding corporations accountable to the public. Executives of the Hyster Corporation are under no more legal obligation to direct corporate efforts toward spurring the American economy than are the executives of American-owned corporations in general. Hyster can take the subsidies and tax breaks and do with them whatever it wants. Indeed, Hyster recently announced another wave of closings. The Engine Charlie principle, as this example illustrates, is no longer valid, but nothing has replaced it to reestablish the link between corporation and nation.

### GOALS AND INDUCEMENTS

The privileged place of the corporation in America has been justified for more than a century by the assumption that corporations automatically fuel the nation's economic growth—that what is good for shareholders is necessarily good for America. In the past few years, however, as corporate America has become simultaneously more attentive to the immediate demands of shareholders for high returns and more international in its ownership and operations, its links to the national economy have seriously weakened.

How *should* the corporation be bound to the nation in the future? Should it be bound at all? The struggle to define a new relationship between corporation and nation will be one of the central economic and political tasks of our era, and it will defy



John Craig

easy solutions. Only the contours of the emerging debate can be seen.

On the one side will be those who argue that any divergence between corporate strategies and national goals is perfectly okay. The world economy as a whole will be stronger if corporations are free to attract investors from anywhere and undertake production anywhere, with the sole objective of rewarding their shareholders with the highest possible returns. In this view, any special relationship between particular corporations and a particular nation will result in an inefficient use of resources overall. As the world economy grows ever more integrated, the nation-state is becoming outmoded and irrelevant anyway. A nation's only legitimate concern with corporations doing business within its borders should be to guard its citizens from harmful side effects of corporate activity, such as pollution, unsafe products, monopolization and fraud.

But this view fails to take into account the positive side effects of corporate activity for a nation—in particular, the training of a nation's work force in new skills applicable outside the company, and technological discoveries with broader potential. Such corporate investments in the skills and knowledge of a nation do not necessarily benefit shareholders, as has been noted, because the benefits often leak out of the company as the new knowledge spreads and as employees take their skills elsewhere. But they are critical for moving an economy forward. Positive side effects like these are as relevant to the welfare of a nation's citizens as are the potential harmful side effects. In a world in which nation-states continuously compete for economic power and the influence that flows from it, decisions about where investments are undertaken, by whom and of what sort, can have profound political consequences as well.

On the other side of the debate will be those who argue that corporations should be tightly bound to the nation. In this view, large corporations in particular should be firmly under public control. It will be urged, for example, that representatives of the public be placed on corporate boards; that some corporate shares be held by publicly appointed trustees or by public authorities; that American corporate investments in other nations, and foreign investments here, be reviewed to ensure compatibility with national economic goals; and that transfers of American capital or technology across the border be carefully monitored.

But this view suffers from the opposite infirmity—it sacrifices market efficiency for public accountability. Without the hope of maximizing profits, the spur of competition and the fear of loss, enterprises have a tendency to stagnate. Too much of this, and entire economies can decline. There is a growing international consensus that public ownership and centralized controls are not the path to progress either.

Recent efforts in the United States to deter hostile corporate takeovers, limit foreign ownership of corporations and improve the business climate through indiscriminate tax breaks and subsidies represent the



worst of both worlds—less efficiency and less accountability to the public. On the one hand, these initiatives can be costly: the regulation of takeovers may simply give job security to incompetent managers, limits on foreign ownership may only worsen the balance of payments, and tax breaks and subsidies thrown willy-nilly in the direction of corporations may induce them to do things they could do better and more cheaply elsewhere.

On the other hand, these initiatives offer no assurance that the corporations that benefit from them will in turn help the broader economy. Indeed, they leave corporate executives free to do whatever they wish with the protections, tax breaks and subsidies they receive. These measures are predicated on a blind trust that corporate executives shielded from takeovers will invest in the economy's long-term development, that American executives and shareholders will make sacrifices for the nation which foreign executives and shareholders will not, and that tax breaks and subsidies will automatically induce corporations to produce the kinds of goods in America that will strengthen the overall economy.

The best solution would be to focus specifically on what things we want corporations to do that are apt to be unprofitable to shareholders, and then to induce corporations to do them. What is it we want corporations to do? Not to preserve jobs in the United States that can be done far more cheaply by foreign workers eager to do them. The costs of trying to keep such jobs—as reflected in higher prices for consumers and onerous burdens on Third World workers deprived of work—would far exceed the benefits. We should ask corporations instead to help propel the economy forward by training workers in new skills and investing in new knowledge. America's economic future depends not on the old jobs its workers used to do but on the new contributions they can make to an increasingly

integrated world economy.

The overriding goal should be to ensure that America is a place where enterprises of whatever nationality perform sophisticated tasks and thus give large numbers of Americans valuable experience. There are several ways of inducing corporations to undertake complex production in America. The first and most obvious is to ensure that citizens are capable of learning quickly on the job, so that they will be the kind of workers global corporations *want* to train. This will require that America as a nation invest more in education—in preschool programs, in basic literacy and numeracy, in scientific and technical competence and in foreign-language training, to name only the most critical areas.

In addition to the general lure of a competent work force, however, we will need more-substantive inducements. They could take several forms. The government might, for example, subsidize corporations that do certain kinds of advanced design and manufacturing in the United States, with the amount of the subsidy depending upon the numbers of employees so engaged. Or the inducement might take the form of a tax credit, similarly structured. Or it might be a "domestic content" rule, requiring that the highest-valued steps in the production of certain goods sold be undertaken in America.

Inducements like these would also be costly, resulting in higher taxes or prices for most Americans. But unlike the open-ended initiatives now commonplace, these inducements would feature a quid pro quo: corporations receiving them would be delivering benefits to the American economy, through on-the-job training and new knowledge. And the greater the benefits to the economy, the greater the inducements to the corporation.

These inducements would not hobble international trade or shelter American corporations from competition. They would be made available to *any* corporation—headquartered anywhere, owned by anyone. Corporations would thus be held accountable for what we as a public sought from them, yet would have a continued incentive to allocate resources to their most profitable uses. Such inducements would have the additional

virtue of pushing us to clarify long-term development strategy—forcing our government representatives to define the categories of experience and skills we think will be most important to the nation's future.

The difficulties in the way of administering such inducements, or even gaining sufficient political support to launch them, should not be underestimated. It has been hard enough to strengthen public education and ensure a minimal level of competency in the American work force; this program of on-the-job training and research is far more ambitious. Moreover, many Americans lack confidence in government's capacity to accomplish public purposes wisely and efficiently, and already feel overwhelmed and overtaxed by public needs.

#### SUBTLE CONNECTIONS

But the alternatives are even less attractive. A national strategy for economic development clearly must be more than, and different from, the sum of the strategies used by the corporations our citizens own or work for. To repeat: this is not because these corporations are irresponsible or unpatriotic but because their widening global opportunities for making profits—and shareholders' mounting demands that they exploit such opportunities—are coming to have no direct or unique bearing on the nation's continued growth. The direction in which Americans are heading—blocking takeovers, hobbling foreign owners, and granting tax breaks and subsidies indiscriminately—seems far riskier and costlier than the direction I have proposed.

The growing divergence between corporation and nation is part of a larger quandary. As our economy becomes so entwined with the world's that the nation's borders lose their commercial significance, Americans need to understand and recognize the subtle ways in which citizens are connected to one another—not through the corporations we own but through the skills and knowledge we absorb. ♦



**America's newest national park  
is a remote wilderness  
of trees, mountains and desert.**

**THE  
GREAT  
BASIN**  
**A Park Apart**



IN A TRADITION THAT DATES BACK TO Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir and the conservation movement of the 19th century, the United States has preserved in its national parks examples of the diversity of the American wilderness. Parks like the Everglades in Florida and Gates of the Arctic in Alaska illustrate the best of their distinctive physical and biological regions. Great Basin National Park in the South Snake Range of eastern Nevada, the country's 49th and newest park, continues the American conservationist tradition.

Stretching from the Sierra Nevada on the west to the Wasatch Mountains on the east, from the Columbia Plateau on the north to the Mojave Desert on the south, the huge area known as the Great Basin is a series of mountain ranges, separated by broad desert flats. Its few waterways never reach the sea, but end in basins or sinks, the largest of which is the Great Salt Lake in Utah. It is the loneliest, least-known part of the American West, a desert wilderness of cactus and blazing sun. But here and there, as in Great Basin National Park, snow-capped peaks define the horizon, their slopes dark with pine forests or bright with fast-moving streams. In such places the land supports an abundance of wildlife—eagle and hawk; bobcat, coyote and mountain lion; bighorn sheep, pronghorn antelope and mule deer.

Though only 31,000 hectares, small by the standards of Yosemite or Yellowstone, Great Basin National Park covers a varied and spectacular terrain, from windblown scrubland and soaring mountains to green forests and the limestone caverns of Lehman Caves. "A trip from the

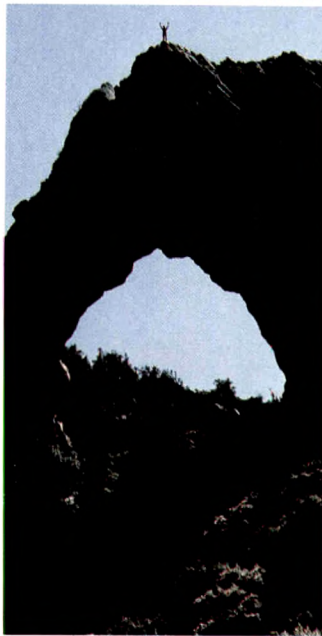
valley to the mountaintop is roughly equivalent to traveling from southern Arizona to Canada," says park superintendent Al Hendricks, "all in 15 kilometers." A hike up Wheeler Peak, at 3981 meters the tallest mountain in the park, winds through five ecological zones, from sage and stunted pinyon-juniper on the valley floor, through mountain mahogany and white-barked aspen, to alpine meadows and arctic tundra above timberline.

At altitudes of 2900 to 3600 meters, just below timberline, the park is home to extensive stands of bristlecone pines, the oldest known living things (see photo on preceding page). These trees survive for 4000 years or longer in the dry limestone soil, and scientists can track the climate thousands of years back by reading bristlecone rings. A very old tree has only a ribbon of living bark, a few live needles on a single branch. The dead bulk of the tree, so resinous and dense it does not rot, has been twisted and burnished by sand and ice into a

fantastic shape, a symbol of the austere beauty of the Great Basin.

The creation of the park has not changed the character of this place. Whatever survives in the Great Basin, including the people who ranch and mine the region, must still have an adaptability coupled with grit. Exploring the sometimes-invisible trails can be a daunting exercise, and the snowmelt lakes do not invite swimming. But for conservationists committed to preserving one of the last stretches of wilderness in the 48 continental states—and for visitors who want to imagine the West as the first settlers must have found it—Great Basin National Park is a new national treasure.

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**Lexington Arch (above) is a major tourist attraction of Great Basin National Park.**

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**Light in Lehman Caves (right) illumines the limestone of thousands of stalactites and stalagmites.**

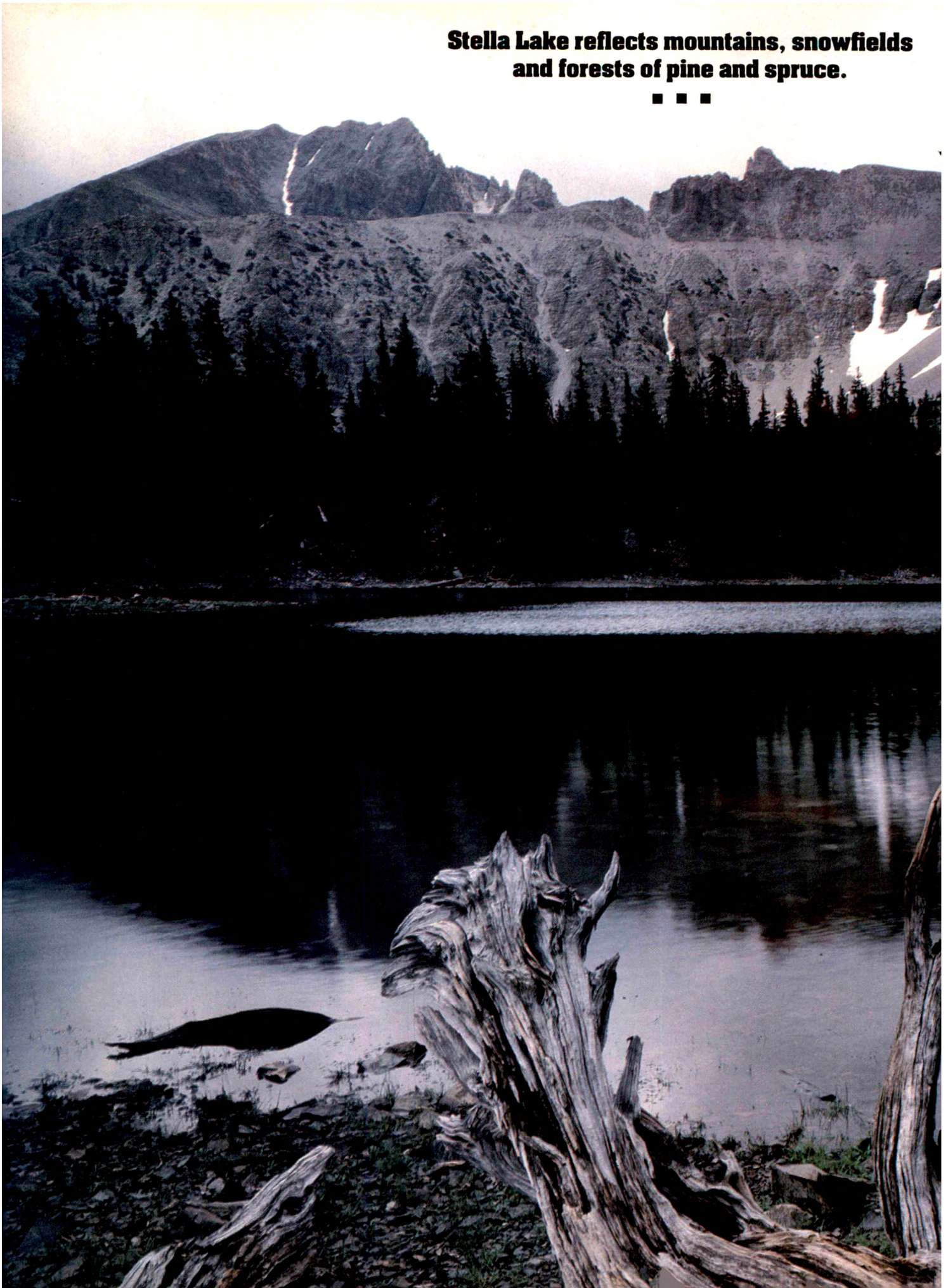






**Stella Lake reflects mountains, snowfields  
and forests of pine and spruce.**

■ ■ ■









**On the trail to Wheeler Peak, a stand of aspen  
glows in the autumn sunrise (right).**

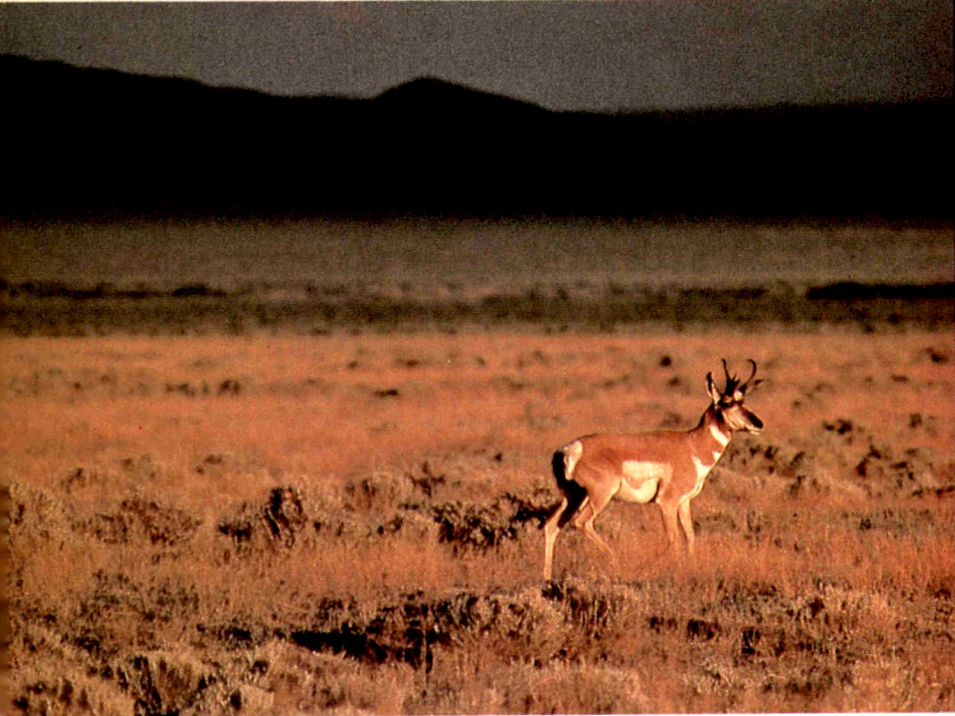
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**Pronghorn antelope (below) roam  
the grassland of the park.**

■ ■ ■

**The bright flowers of the prickly pear  
(bottom) bloom for only a day.**

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**The view from Wheeler Peak (right),  
the park's summit, is a breathtaking  
panorama of basin and range.**

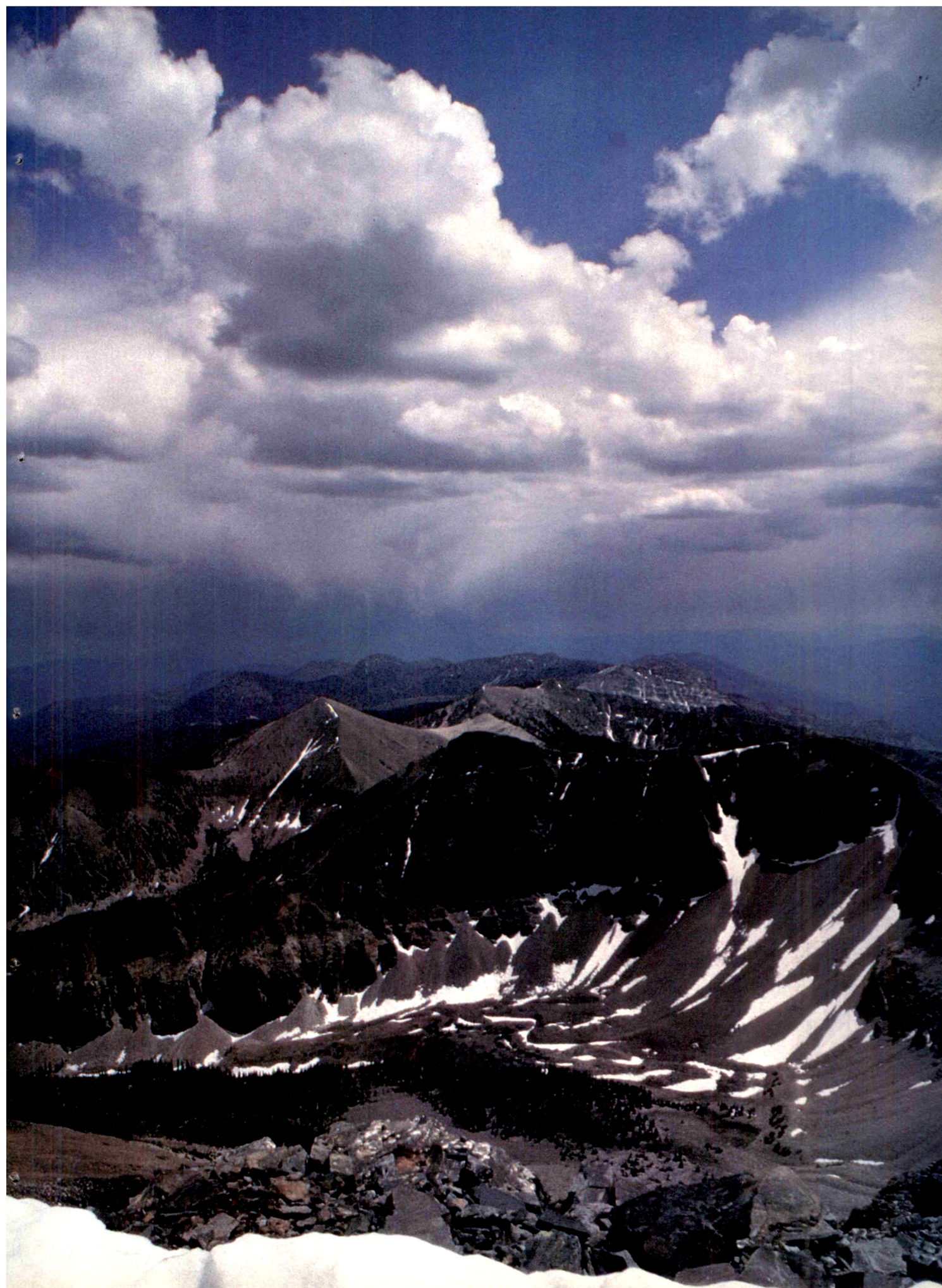
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**Thousands of years of windblown  
sand and ice sculpt bristlecone pines  
into living driftwood (below).**



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# PLAGUES, HISTORY AND AIDS

By Robert M. Swenson

Research is providing us with a scientific understanding of AIDS. History can help us see how this disease may affect our world.

*From the bubonic plague in 14th-century Europe through the global influenza pandemic of 1918-19, epidemics have shaped societies and, at times, changed the course of history. In this article, medical scientist Robert Swenson describes how societies have responded to threats posed by earlier epidemics and compares their impact to the impact of AIDS. He concludes that, although science has made great strides in understanding the biology of AIDS, our human responses to epidemics have evolved little over the last 600 years. And it is these ancient and often irrational reactions of society to a contagion in its midst that may hinder efforts to solve the problem of AIDS. Many of the current "facts" about AIDS are subject to debate and almost monthly revision as new medical research data and societal statistics emerge. The theories and opinions presented here are the author's, but they are held by many other experts as well.*

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In December 1981, an article appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine* describing a curious cluster of seven men who, for no apparent reason, had severe infections with microorganisms that previously infected only profoundly immunocompromised individuals. Soon this became known as acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). Since then, the number of cases has increased at a startling rate. By the end of 1987, more than 50,000 cases had been reported in the United States and an additional 70,000 cases have been recognized in 129 other countries. This worldwide outbreak of a new infectious disease has engendered much fear and apprehension. As a result, there have been frequent references to previous epidemics. Perhaps most frequent are references to the Black Death, the epidemic of bubonic plague that swept through Europe in the middle of the 14th century. Despite current fears, there has been little attempt to reexamine previous epidemics for comparisons and insights that may be relevant to the AIDS epidemic—that is, to place acquired immunodeficiency syndrome in some sort of historical perspective.

There are at least three general ways to examine these questions. First, one can look at previous epidemics and the ways in which they have affected nations, politics and even the course of history. Second, one can describe the internal "socio-

logical anatomy" of an epidemic, the series of social and political responses that occur during the course of an epidemic. These reactions tend to be somewhat similar in all epidemics and are already occurring during the current outbreak of AIDS. Lastly, since AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease, it is illuminating to compare the response to AIDS with society's responses to other sexually transmitted diseases early in this century.

## CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF PLAGUE

Bubonic plague struck Europe in 1347, but events of the previous 200 years had set the stage for this great epidemic. The 11th and 12th centuries were politically stable and relatively disease-free, and food production had increased dramatically. As a result, the population, which had been 25 million in 950 A.D., had tripled to 75 million by 1250 A.D. Around 1300 A.D., a significant drop occurred in the mean temperatures of Europe, and widespread crop failures ensued. The resulting famine forced many peasants to move to the towns, producing severe poverty and crowding. Under these conditions the rat population also increased greatly.

In urban areas, plague is a disease affecting rats; it is spread by the rat flea. Infected fleas rapidly leave dead rats for a new host, and if other rats are not available, they will attempt to feed on humans, thereby infecting them. Thus, it is easy to see how, under the appropriate conditions of poverty, crowding and poor sanitation, an epidemic such as this could occur.

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**Kleidung wider den Tod zu Rom. Anno 1656.**  
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Abb. 63. Pestarzt in einer Schutzkleidung. Kupfr. von Paulus Furst nach  
J. Columbina 1656. München, Kupferstichkabinett.

Plague continued to break out in parts of Europe until as recently as 1894. This 17th-century engraving by Paulus Furst shows the protective clothing of a German plague physician. The eyeholes of the mask were covered with glass, the beaklike nosepiece filled with perfume.

Plague was already established in several areas in Asia. However, not until the mid-14th century was overland travel efficient enough to carry plague westward to the Mediterranean Sea. The epidemic arrived in Marseilles in 1348, and by 1351 all of Europe was afflicted. The immediate effects of the epidemic were devastating. The most accurate estimate for total deaths during this first wave of the epidemic is 25 million, or one-third of the population of Europe. No segment of society was spared. Following this epidemic, recurrent waves of plague kept the population at this reduced level for another 150 years. The consequences of this epidemic were far-reaching. Since the population was devastated, real wages increased dramatically. The population decreased more rapidly than the fall in food supplies, and the resultant drop in food prices made it impossible for landowners to support their large manors. These changes led directly to the end of the old manorial system.

The epidemic also had profound effects on the church and religious thinking. People turned away from traditional religion, which was perceived as having failed totally during the epidemic. Many turned to frenzied, superstitious religion (for example, the flagellants), and, for generations after, much religious thinking focused on the apocalypse. This dissatisfaction with the church contributed in a major way to the Reformation.

Medicine was also profoundly changed by the plague. Most cleric-physicians died. These physicians were viewed as having drastically failed, which resulted in a tremendous rise in the number and popularity of surgeons. New medical texts were developed, and the rudi-



ments of scientific inquiry began. The initial theories of contagion were developed, and the concept of quarantine was first recognized. This resulted in the first basic hospitals and the development of early public-health measures.

Two additional points are extremely important. Plague could not have occurred where it did, when it did, or taken the form it did until a variety of conditions had occurred to make it possible. For example, the urban population had to reach a certain density, and living conditions and sanitation had to decline to a certain level. The rat population had to reach a certain density and proximity to the human population. And, second, travel from Asia had to be sufficiently rapid and frequent to successfully bring the plague bacillus to the European continent. If any one of these had not occurred, the plague epidemic would not have happened. Furthermore, the devastating effects of plague continued because there were recurrent epidemics for the next 150 years.

#### **DIFFERENTIAL IMPACT**

The most recent worldwide epidemic was the outbreak of influenza A that swept the world in 1918-19. The first cases of influenza were recognized in the United States. Two months later massive epidemics began in Spain, France and England. The attack rates (number of cases per 100 people) were extremely high, particularly among young adults. Despite massive public-health measures, influenza spread rapidly throughout the world. By the time the pandemic ended in 1919, there had been one million deaths in the United States, 10 million in India and an estimated 30 million deaths throughout the world. Despite being the largest epidemic in history, it had little long-term effect, because, unlike the plague epidemic, the influenza epidemic was relatively short-lived and the population losses were rapidly replaced.

Epidemics have a major effect when the disease has a different effect on two populations—what sci-

**T**hroughout history, infectious diseases have had a major effect on military campaigns. In 1812, Napoleon assembled an army of 500,000 men to invade Russia. By 1813, only 3000 soldiers remained alive to complete the retreat. The vast majority of deaths were the result of typhus and dysentery, rather than battle.

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entists call a "differential impact." The most dramatic example of this is the importation of smallpox into Central America by the Spanish. Humans are the only reservoir for the smallpox virus, and transmission is only from human to human. In those who survive infection there is complete, lifelong immunity. Thus, in areas where smallpox has been ongoing, the surviving population is immune, while in other areas where smallpox has not been present, the population remains susceptible. The native populations of the Americas were free of smallpox. By 1500 A.D., however, smallpox had long been established in Europe, and as a result the adult population was largely immune.

In 1520, a small expedition led by Pánfilo de Narvaez left Cuba and sailed for Mexico. When the expedition landed one crewman had active smallpox, and infection was easily established in the susceptible Indian population. From there, smallpox spread rapidly through Central and South America. It has been estimated that out of a native population of 25 million, 15 to 18 million died of smallpox. Thus, a major factor, if not the major factor, in the Spanish conquest of the Americas was the importation of smallpox into the susceptible native population. (It has also been suggested that the immunity of the Spanish to this devastating disease had great psychological effect on the Indians,

making the Spanish appear invincible.)

Throughout history, infectious diseases have had a major effect on military battles. A dramatic example occurred during Napoleon's invasion of Russia. In June 1812, Napoleon assembled an army of almost 500,000 men to invade Russia. While traveling through Poland and western Russia, almost half of his troops died or were immobilized by typhus. By the time Napoleon began his retreat from Moscow, only 80,000 able-bodied men remained. These catastrophic losses continued, and by June 1813 only 3000 soldiers remained alive to complete the retreat. The vast majority of deaths were the result of typhus and dysentery rather than battle injuries or exposure to the severe Russian winter. Thus, the power of Napoleon in Europe was broken more by diseases, especially typhus, than by military opposition.

From the mid-19th century to the present, as government bureaucracies became larger and took control of more of society's functions, much smaller epidemics produced change through legislation enacted in response to them. The cholera epidemics in the United States in 1832, 1849 and 1866 provide excellent examples of these changes.

The largest cholera epidemic began in 1832. The city of New Orleans was hardest hit with 5000 cases. By historical standards, this was a very small epidemic, but it engendered the clear beginnings of public-health policy. In early 1832, the New York state legislature



passed laws enabling communities to establish local boards of health, and in the summer of 1832 the New York City Board of Health was created. Quarantine regulations were passed and enforced. Cholera hospitals were established. Housing and care for the destitute were set up. Slum clearance was begun, and early efforts of food and drug control were undertaken. As the epidemic subsided, however, the government felt that these measures were no longer necessary, and the New York City Board was disbanded.

### ANATOMY OF AN EPIDEMIC

In 1854, English physician John Snow demonstrated that cholera was spread through the water supply. By 1866 few physicians doubted that cholera was portable and transmissible. With the threat of a third cholera epidemic, New York State passed a law creating the Metropolitan Sanitary District and Board of Health in New York City. This first strong, permanent board of health in the United States exists to this day. The sanitary and public-health measures were similar to those employed in 1832 but were more extensive and rigidly enforced. They were also much more effective, as only 591 cases of cholera occurred in New York City during this epidemic. Many of these regulations remain in effect and form the basis of present-day public-health policy.

One can also examine the internal anatomy of an epidemic, the behavioral response of both individuals and society to a given epidemic. It soon becomes apparent that there are certain attitudes and behaviors that recur during all epidemics.

First is the denial that the disease in question is even occurring. On June 26, 1832, the first cases of cholera developed in New York City. When the New York Medical Society stated publicly that these nine cases had been diagnosed, the announcement was immediately attacked by New Yorkers who felt it was premature or unwarranted. Not until six weeks later, when the evidence of the epidemic could no

longer be suppressed, was it officially recognized by the New York Board of Health. Denial also occurs at a national level. Following the initial outbreak of influenza in the United States in 1918, major epidemics occurred two months later in England, France and Spain. Initially each country attempted to deny the occurrence of influenza within its borders (noting, of course, that influenza was already present somewhere else).

Once an epidemic is recognized, it follows quickly that someone (or something) else is blamed for it. As bubonic plague swept through Europe in 1348, it was claimed that it was caused by Jews who had poisoned wells. The cholera epidemics in the United States fell disproportionately on the poor. At that time, poverty was viewed as a consequence of idleness and intemperance. Since new immigrants were often the most poor, they were blamed for their own susceptibility to cholera, as well as for bringing the disease into the country. Prostitutes were also blamed for the epidemic, even though cholera was not thought to be a venereal disease. Many felt that their "moral corruption" caused them, as well as their clients, to develop cholera. Blame could also be placed at a national level. In addition to attempting to deny their own epidemics, the countries affected by the 1918 influenza epidemic blamed one another. The French referred to the epidemic as the Plague of the Spanish Lady, and the English called it the French Disease.

Epidemics occur in part because old diseases are not yet understood or new diseases have arisen. In either case, physicians do not have knowledge either to prevent the epidemic or to treat its victims effectively. As a result, society views the physicians and medicine of the time as having failed. A corollary of the failure of the existing methods of medicine is the rise of alternative therapies during an epidemic. During the plague epidemic, innumera-

ble remedies and preventatives arose. During the first cholera epidemic in the United States, physicians routinely employed a limited array of unpleasant, even dangerous, therapies. The most common were calomel (a mercury compound that frequently resulted in mercury poisoning), laudanum (an opium compound) and bleeding. These measures failed to treat cholera and also had numerous untoward side effects. Given the failure and hazards of traditional medicine, it is no surprise that it was surpassed in popularity by botanical medicine during these early cholera epidemics.

A final effect that is common to all epidemics is that they stimulate a variety of new laws. Initially, these laws are viewed as immediately necessary to prevent or control an epidemic, but often they remain in effect long after the epidemic has subsided.

### RESPECTABILITY AND RISK

To understand the AIDS epidemic, it is helpful to review also society's responses to syphilis and gonorrhea in the early part of this century. With the realization that these were sexually transmitted diseases with grave health consequences (mental illness and infertility, for example), it was recognized that there was a need for sex education; yet great obstacles existed to what became known as the social-hygiene movement. First, the remaining tenets of Victorian respectability made it virtually impossible to discuss venereal diseases. The basic assumption was that men were driven by lust and that discussing sex with them would only make them more uncontrollable. The major question became: how can sex education be presented without anyone's recognizing the subject? The answer was to include much talk about plants, birds, bees and little about sex. Given these subterfuges, there could be little effective sex education. Prince Morrow, a leader of the social-hygiene movement, concluded, "Social sentiment holds that it is a greater violation of the properties of life publicly to mention venereal disease than privately to contract it."



It also became clear that large numbers of middle-class wives were being infected by their husbands, who had contracted their infections from prostitutes. In response to the epidemic of venereal diseases among the middle class, physicians actively promulgated the idea of casual, nonsexual transmission of syphilis and gonorrhea. At that time, it was apparently more important to protect the reputation of middle-class males than to provide a proper understanding of these diseases. The idea of casual transmission remains firmly entrenched to this day, even though there has never been evidence to support that it actually occurs.

As we shall see, all of these ideas have persisted in one form or another throughout the 20th century with profound effects on our response to sexually transmitted diseases.

#### THE SPREAD OF AIDS

With this background, we can now turn to the epidemiology of AIDS. AIDS is the final stage of the infection caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), first identified in 1984. HIV is a retrovirus that contains RNA or ribonucleic acid [a substance that carries out DNA's instructions for producing proteins within cells]. The RNA is used as a template to make a complementary DNA sequence that is incorporated into the chromosome of the infected cell. The host cell infected is the T4 lymphocyte, a white blood cell that has the central role in controlling the entire immune system. Once incorporated into the host cell, the virus may remain latent for several years. Eventually, HIV begins reproducing itself within the cell, and new virus particles escape from the cell by literally punching holes in its membrane, producing the death of the T4 lymphocyte. This slow, progressive destruction of T4 cells ultimately impairs the immune system to the point that a person becomes vulnerable to "opportunistic infections," with organisms that would never infect someone with a "normal" immune system. As the immune system becomes progressively impaired, various cancers may also develop. The final stage of HIV infection, when opportunistic infec-

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tions or cancers occur, is recognized as AIDS. It is important to remember that it is the combination of immune dysfunction caused by HIV *plus* the opportunistic infection or cancers that fulfills the definition of AIDS.

Where did HIV come from and how is it transmitted? Retroviruses are very old and have adapted themselves to a variety of animals. Over millions of years they have evolved to survive in higher mammals. Relatively recently they have infected the highest subhuman primates in central Africa. In most animals they cause no disease and live a harmless, symbiotic relationship. Recently (in an evolutionary sense) the HIV retrovirus has evolved further, so that it can now infect humans and destroy the cells it infects.

The first evidence of human infection with HIV is found in serum samples obtained in Africa in 1959; the first AIDS cases are believed to have occurred in the late 1960s. By the mid-1970s, the boom in modern air travel spread HIV throughout the world. Because of the long latent period between HIV infection and the development of AIDS, the first cases of AIDS did not occur in the United States until 1978. The first American population infected with the virus were homosexual males.

The next group infected with HIV were intravenous drug users. Homo-

sexual drug users, already infected with HIV, infected other intravenous drug users, through sharing needles for injecting drugs. Drug users are also a relatively small, closed group, and HIV infection has spread rapidly among them. This second wave of the epidemic appears to be two to three years behind the first wave.

The next wave of the epidemic, which is only barely beginning, is the spread of HIV infection to the sexual partners of bisexual males and intravenous drug users. Recent data indicate that early in the course of HIV infection a person is less infectious than later. This phenomenon has contributed another latent period, so that these cases are just now beginning to appear. The final wave of the epidemic, which has not yet begun, will be when HIV infection is spread widely into the remainder of the population.

#### MODES OF TRANSMISSION

A tremendous amount is known about the biology and transmissibility of HIV. The virus is present in largest numbers in blood and semen. HIV is also found in vaginal secretions and breast milk in smaller but significant numbers. These are the only four fluids capable of transmitting infection. Moreover, transmitting HIV is very difficult. Transmission requires a large volume of blood (as in blood transfusions) or repeated inoculation of smaller volumes (as with intravenous drug users). While infection can



be transmitted through heterosexual or homosexual intercourse, anal intercourse appears to be a more effective mode of transmission than vaginal intercourse. The only other modes of possible transmission are *in utero* or at time of birth and, perhaps, through breast milk to the newborn infant. HIV is found occasionally in small numbers in saliva, tears and urine, although clearly in numbers too small to transmit infection. Because of this, casual transmission just does not occur. The risk of occupational infection among health-care workers caring for infected patients also appears to be extremely low. In a careful study of single needle-stick exposures in health-care workers, only one in more than 2400 has become infected with HIV. (In a similar situation with the hepatitis B virus, more than 500 people would be infected.) The small number of occupational cases of HIV transmission (approximately eight) all appear to be related to unusual or excessive contact with blood.

There still appears to be a great deal of confusion about the meaning of the antibody test for HIV. Following infection with HIV, the virus begins multiplying within the body. The host's immune system recognizes the "foreign" virus and begins making antibodies directed against it. After three to six months, virtually all people who have been infected develop specific antibodies against HIV. Despite this, nearly all people with the HIV antibody have live virus circulating in their blood; that is, they can transmit HIV infection to others. Because HIV is an RNA-containing retrovirus, the presence of the HIV antibody means that the person has been infected with HIV (not merely exposed to HIV) and can transmit infection. This differs from other common infections, like measles, where the presence of antibodies means the person has been infected, is now immune, and the virus is no longer present in the body. Yet a positive HIV-antibody test means only that a person has been infected with the virus, not that he has AIDS.

A final area of concern is the current extent of HIV infection not only in the United States but also in the re-

mainder of the world. At present there are very few data from Africa. Data from one central African capital suggest that six percent of the general population in that city are infected, mostly in the 20- to 35-year age group. In rural areas, less than one-half of one percent of the population are infected. Heterosexual transmission is the major mode of spreading HIV. Transmission by mosquitoes or other insects clearly does not occur (although this rumor appears indestructible). The World Health Organization has estimated that 10 to 20 million people are infected with HIV throughout the world.

#### AIDS IN PERSPECTIVE

The data available from the United States are also incomplete. Approximately 80 percent of a group of homosexual males in San Francisco followed since the late 1970s for the hepatitis B vaccine trials are HIV positive. Since the available data tend to be from the most sexually active individuals, the 80 percent figure cannot be generalized to all the homosexual males in the United States. Seropositivity [a blood test's indication that HIV antibodies are present] among homosexuals appears to be highly variable from place to place, and in other areas appears to be significantly less. In some areas of New York City, 80 percent of the intravenous drug users are seropositive, but this falls off dramatically as the distance from New York increases. The only data from the general population are from persons donating blood and from military recruits. Among blood donors with no history of being in a risk group, four per 10,000 are seropositive for HIV. As of May 1987, the prevalence of the HIV antibody among applicants for military service is 1.5 per 1000 among military recruits. Using all of these data, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that there are currently 1.5 to two million people infected with HIV in the United States.

How many of these people infected with HIV will eventually develop AIDS? The group followed longest has been the cohort of homosexual

males in San Francisco. To date, 36 percent of HIV-positive males in this group have developed AIDS. Over the last three years, five percent per year have developed AIDS, and the number of cases increases each year. Similar data have been obtained for groups of intravenous drug users. No one yet knows what percentage of HIV-infected individuals will ultimately develop AIDS.

Using these kinds of data, the CDC has estimated that there will be 270,000 cases of AIDS in the United States by 1991. More recent data suggest that there may be as many as 30 percent more cases (350,000). Projections for the rest of the world are as many as seven million cases by 1991. These estimates are minimum numbers based on numbers of people infected now. Even if transmission of HIV were halted today, these numbers of cases would still occur over the next four years. However, there is little to suggest that HIV transmission has slackened. Thus, it appears that the numbers of HIV-infected people will continue to increase for the foreseeable future.

Several assumptions are necessary in order to discuss fully the effect of the AIDS epidemic. First, it is certain that the number of persons infected with HIV will continue to grow. Widespread travel will continue to carry HIV infection throughout the world. For now, the only methods of halting the spread of the virus are abstinence from sexual intercourse, "safe sex" or, in the case of drug users, stopping intravenous drug use. The fraction of HIV-infected individuals that develop AIDS will also continue to grow.

There are two factors that may interrupt or slow these trends. Azidothymidine (AZT) is a new antiviral drug that inhibits multiplication of HIV. Although clinically effective, it is limited by significant toxicity. Within five to seven years, safer and more effective drugs will probably be available. These drugs will dramatically alter the progression of HIV infection to AIDS, but they will remain expensive and difficult to distribute widely. Vaccine development is a slow, tedious process. A safe, inexpensive, widely applicable vaccine will proba-

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bly not be available for 10 to 15 years.

With this background information, one can begin to put the AIDS epidemic into some sort of perspective. How does this epidemic compare to the epidemic of plague in the 14th century? Simply stated, it doesn't and won't ever. During the first three years of the plague epidemic, one-third to one-half of the population of Europe died. Recurrent waves of plague kept the population at that level for 150 years. The closest contemporary analogy to the plague epidemic would be nuclear holocaust (or more accurately, the nuclear winter following something less than total nuclear annihilation). Even if all 20 million people now infected with HIV should die, this number would still be less than the mortality during the influenza epidemic of 1918. The lasting effect of the AIDS epidemic will not be in the sheer number of lives lost.

There is one important analogy between the AIDS and plague epidemics. As with plague, the specific form of the AIDS epidemic has been determined by a number of specific factors. The spread of HIV infection throughout the world required the development of rapid, frequent and inexpensive travel. It was also exceedingly important that HIV was introduced into a smaller, closed community (that is, homosexual males) at a time when sexual activity and promiscuity had increased substantially. This provided the means to amplify dramatically the spread of HIV in this population. Finally, the sharing of needles among drug users was an efficient way of infecting this group, who then became the conduit of HIV infection to the remainder of heterosexual society. As with plague, if any of these factors had not occurred, the AIDS epidemic would have been changed significantly or perhaps would not even have occurred.

It is valuable to ponder the different effects the AIDS epidemic has on various populations. For example, what effect will this epidemic have on regions of Africa? The concentration of AIDS cases among young adults, the potential leaders, will likely have profound effects on some African nations. Already, cases of neonatal AIDS are beginning to erode the im-

provements in infant-mortality rates attained over the past 20 years. The economic drain will be immense and will likely extend far beyond the public-health sector in these nations.

The "internal anatomy" of the AIDS epidemic has been strikingly similar to other epidemics in history. In the first years of the epidemic, it was common to hear the statement that AIDS was not a major epidemic—that is, to deny its existence. This soon shifted to a more specific form of denial. As it became apparent that, in the United States, homosexual males and intravenous drug users were primarily affected, people began to deny that the disease would be spread into the rest of society. Although the epidemiological data still suggest that AIDS will continue to spread gradually into all segments of society, there continues to be widespread denial or disbelief of this possibility. The slow spread and long incubation period have made it easy to deny the spread of HIV infection. At the moment, more than two million people in the United States, including many heterosexuals, are already infected, but the attention remains focused on AIDS cases involving homosexual males and drug users.

#### SOCIETY'S RESPONSE

The AIDS epidemic has provided ample opportunities to cast blame. Much of the rest of the world blames Africa for "starting" the epidemic. Americans blame homosexuals and drug users for starting and continuing the epidemic; for many, it is clearly the moral failing of these groups that has caused them to be infected. For example, some of America's evangelists cite AIDS as a sign of God's wrath on homosexuals and drug users. These attitudes are reminiscent of the 19th-century view that poverty was a moral failing and that cholera was God's wrath on the poor. The last feature common to all great epidemics is fear. Clearly, the fear of transmissibility of HIV infection is tremendously exaggerated in the public's psyche. In fact, this paralyzing fear is the single major stumbling block to instituting reasonable, rational public policies.

As in other epidemics, present-day

medicine has been criticized for its failures. With no cure for AIDS currently available, we have seen the rise of numerous alternative therapies. People have grasped at claims of the value of high doses of vitamins, various nutritional remedies and other unproven remedies. Faced with an incurable illness, it is no surprise that people turn to the claims of botanical medicine voiced more than 150 years ago during the cholera epidemics.

The current approach to controlling AIDS is similar to that proposed to control syphilis and gonorrhea in the early 1900s. For the vast majority of people, AIDS is, and will be, a sexually transmitted infection. Therefore, the only way to control transmission today is to educate people about this sexual transmission and its prevention—that is, "safe sex." People will remain ignorant about HIV transmission until we speak clearly and specifically about sex and sexual transmission.

The idea that sexually transmitted disease can be spread by casual contact remains firmly entrenched in our culture. Despite the absence of any scientific evidence to support this idea, it has persisted to this day and contributes to the fear of casual transmission of HIV infections. Perhaps at some semiconscious level, society still feels the need to maintain this belief.

Epidemics have recurred throughout history. As scientific understanding has increased and superstitions subsided, much has changed about these epidemics. In very major ways, these changes have made the AIDS epidemic unlike any previous great epidemic. However, as I have tried to point out, in many ways society's responses to the AIDS epidemic thus far have been quite similar to previous societies' responses to epidemics. Although our advanced biotechnology has allowed us to apply sophisticated solutions to the biological problems of AIDS, our human responses have changed little from previous epidemics and hinder us from dealing effectively with many of the social problems that are part of the AIDS epidemic. ♦



# FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND THE CONSTITUTION

By Louis Henkin

In the formulation of American foreign policy, which powers reside with the Congress and which with the President?

*Foreign observers are frequently mystified by the separation of power in the United States between the President and the Congress, especially in the realm of foreign affairs. (Indeed, many Americans are still puzzled by this even after two centuries.) Occasionally an attempt is made to find out what the Framers of the U.S. Constitution intended, but, as Louis Henkin points out in this article, "what the Framers intended can be inferred only from what they did" and what they did was create a Constitution that is ambiguous (perhaps intentionally) about the division of power in both foreign affairs and domestic affairs. Professor Henkin presents a comprehensive analysis of that division and its constitutional roots. He tends to emphasize a stronger role for Congress in foreign affairs ("Good government, as well as democracy, demands fewer decisions by one representative alone"). A different view is provided on page 26 by former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who makes the case for presidential preeminence in foreign affairs.*

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**F**oreign affairs" is not a term found in the U.S. Constitution, and what Americans characterize as foreign affairs is not a discrete constitutional category. Many of the provisions of the Constitution apply equally, and have had equal success, in foreign as in domestic affairs. Some particular constitutional dispositions for foreign affairs—for example, the grant to the federal government of virtually full authority, to the exclusion of the states—have surely proved their wisdom.

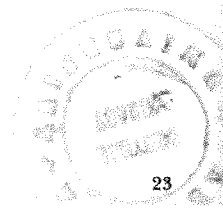
After more than 200 years the difficult constitutional issues of foreign affairs arise from the so-called separation of powers and the various checks and balances between Congress and the President. As regards foreign affairs in particular, the constitutional blueprint has proved to be unclear and incomplete, and there is no agreed guiding principle to help resolve its uncertainties. In 1954, in a famous essay on the distribution of political authority under the Constitution, Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson wrote: "There is a zone of twilight in which [the President] and Congress may have concurrent authority, or in which its distribution is uncertain." Important foreign-affairs powers lie in that twilight zone.

Issues of power between Congress and the President in foreign affairs have not been resolved and are not

soon likely to be. The courts, to which Americans look for constitutional resolution, promise little help. The Supreme Court has developed an armory of reasons for not hearing issues. In addition, the courts have declared certain issues to be political questions (not meaningfully defined by the courts) and therefore not justiciable, and foreign-affairs issues have been particularly vulnerable to being declared nonjusticiable.

The recent bicentennial of the Constitution nevertheless invites taking stock and seeking understanding, if not answers.

For the Framers of the Constitution, the "separation of powers" was an article of faith. The principle that different and separate branches of government should exercise different and separate functions provided the outline which they followed in drafting the Constitution, though powers they separated in principle emerged substantially mixed in fact. During the subsequent 200 years, both the Presidency and the Congress have been transformed. The Founding Fathers would not readily recognize the Congress they prescribed—now a body of over 500 members, with both houses directly elected, its





business transacted by a complex of committees and powerful staffers. The Framers would be incredulous at what has become of their original creation, the Presidency, an office conceived in doubt and controversy, its powers seemingly strictly limited, yet commonly described today as the most powerful in the world. (It would make Genghis Khan green with envy, President Harry Truman once said.) "The President" has become "the Presidency," a branch of government consisting of many departments, with a bureaucracy of millions. The President's constitutional assignment to recommend to the consideration of Congress "from time to time...such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient" has made him the principal author of the national legislative program and of a multi-thousand-million dollar budget. But the constitutional blueprint of 200 years ago has not been amended in any relevant respects, and it continues to define the powers of Congress and the President and relations between them.

For the Framers, Congress came first. In Congress they vested "all legislative powers herein granted"; the President was to exercise "the executive power." In regard to foreign, as to domestic, affairs (our characterizations, not the Constitution's), Congress was to legislate and the President was to take care that the laws be faithfully executed. Revenue would be raised and expenditures determined by Congress, and "no money shall be drawn from the Treasury, but in consequence of appropriations made by law." The President would appoint officials, but only with the advice and consent of the Senate. Both the power of the President to appoint and the requirement that the Senate consent applied equally to a secretary of state for foreign affairs or an ambassador to a foreign nation as to an attorney general or other officials in charge of domestic matters.

In its outlines the constitutional division of authority between Congress and President is reasonably clear and therefore not often disputed, though Presidents have chafed at the distribution, and both Congress and the President have sometimes tried to move or blur the line that divides their estates. After more than 200 years of

the Constitution, although Congress and the Presidency are transformed, their parts in U.S. governance are recognizably those projected by the constitutional blueprint: Congress makes laws and the President executes them; Congress levies taxes to provide for the common defense and the general welfare, and the President spends as Congress directs.

**T**he division between recommending legislation and enacting it, between passing laws and executing them, between appropriating money and spending it, applies in foreign as in domestic affairs. In foreign affairs, however, that division does not exhaust constitutional authority: there is more to foreign relations than laws and expenditures. The Constitution itself confers and allocates important powers that do not conform to the division between making and executing law, notably the President's treaty power. Moreover, the constitutional blueprint for the governance of foreign affairs has proved to be starkly incomplete, indeed skimpy.

The relevant prescriptions are few. The Constitution states that Congress has the power to tax and spend for the common defense and the general welfare (including, no doubt, foreign-affairs purposes), to regulate commerce with foreign nations, to define offenses against the law of nations, to declare war. The President has the power to appoint ambassadors and to make treaties (with the consent of the Senate). The Constitution provides that the President shall be the commander in chief.

If constitutional text is insufficient, the intent of the Framers is also less than determinative. The record of the deliberations at various stages of the process is spare. Even the classic annotation, *The Federalist Papers*, adds and clarifies little for our purposes. In large measure what the Framers intended can be inferred only from what they did; in some measure one might guess what they had in mind on

the basis of what we know of their political ideas and commitments, insofar as there was a single or dominant cast to their thought.

The purpose of the Constitution was "to form a more perfect Union," and for the Framers that meant a union better able also to conduct relations with other nations. They hoped to achieve that purpose by giving the new federal government, to the exclusion of the states, the control of foreign relations. They divided the powers of the new government-to-be between Congress and a new office they created, the Presidency. That office had no model. It was to be like, yet unlike, the English Crown. Its powers were to be significant yet circumscribed; in the end details were determined not by principle but by compromise.

In general, for foreign as for domestic affairs, the text reflected the general conceptions and inclinations of the Framers about the different functions of government and their allocation. In principle they divided legislative from executive power. But for them the conduct of foreign relations was "executive altogether." The Presidency was to have some foreign-affairs powers that under the Articles of Confederation had been exercised by Congress. But the Framers were determined not to make the President a republican, elected facsimile of the king of England, with republican-royal powers and republican-royal prerogatives. Above all, the President was not to have the king's power to go to war; that power was given to Congress. The President was entrusted with the "royal" power to make treaties, but subject to the advice and consent of the Senate. Indeed, approval of a treaty required the consent of an extraordinary majority, two-thirds of the senators present.

During the ensuing 200 years Presidents have prominently and frequently invoked powers as commander in chief. Strictly, the designation that "the President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy" is not a grant of power (though some powers are necessarily implied in the function). Having learned a lesson in the Revolutionary War, the Framers determined that there should be a single, civilian commander in chief, rather than command by



Congress or congressional committee. The evidence is that in the contemplation of the Framers the armed forces would be under the command of the President but at the disposition of Congress. Principally, the President would command the forces in wars declared by Congress. As an exception, the Framers agreed to leave to "the executive the power to repel sudden attacks": authorization by Congress might not be possible to obtain promptly, or at all, and could be assumed. There is no evidence that the Framers contemplated any significant independent role—or authority—for the President as commander in chief when there was no war.

The Framers had a reasonably clear idea of the powers they were conferring upon Congress: in general, they saw Congress as the principal "policy-making" (our term, not theirs) organ in foreign as in domestic affairs, and in their conception Congress was to dominate the political process. They had a much less clear view about the Presidency. They allocated to the President particular functions, but these did not add up to a comprehensive, coherent conception of the office, or of the division of authority between Congress and President, in the mind of any of the Framers; surely there was no consensus about it. Except as they expressly provided, many of the Framers were content, I suspect, to leave the office undefined in the good hands of the man all expected would be the first President. George Washington would shape the office.

History has supplied answers to some of the questions that constitutional text and "original intent" left unanswered. George Washington did indeed begin to shape the office, not in accordance with principle or plan but in response to events. The major developments in the conception and scope of the presidential office concerned matters that were not in the text of the Constitution. The President's place in the configuration of government combined with the character of foreign relations to shape the Presidency, as well as to launch it on the paths of uncertainty and controversy.

Foreign policy, then as now, consisted of much more than making treaties or legislating tariffs. The con-

duct of foreign relations was a day-to-day process, continuous and informal. Unlike Congress, dispersed during most of U.S. history in the distances of the country, the Presidency was always "in session." Unlike Congress, which can act only formally, by statute or resolution (and in effect only publicly and sometimes dramatically), the President can act quickly and informally, often discreetly or secretly. In many circumstances, unless the President acted, the United States could not act at all. Major agreements were made as treaties with the consent of the Senate, but the practice of the President acting alone to make informal agreements was inevitable and began early.

**F**rom the start the President was the eyes and ears and voice of the United States; slowly he became also its sturdy arms. In response to events, Presidents asserted authority to use whatever military forces Congress had provided, for purposes de-

termined by the President: early on, Thomas Jefferson ordered the navy to defend U.S. vessels against the Barbary pirates. As their "foreign-relations power" took root and grew, Presidents found themselves wearing two hats. In limited, uncertain steps the President as commander in chief began to carry out what the President as foreign-affairs executive determined. In time, precedents accumulated and Presidents gained confidence and claimed more authority. Beginning early and continuing to this day, in several hundred instances of varying scope and significance, Presidents have deployed the armed forces of the United States for foreign-policy purposes determined by the President on his own authority.

Congress contributed to the steady growth of presidential power. Congress early recognized and confirmed the President's control of day-to-day foreign intercourse, and the resulting monopoly of information and experience promoted presidential claims of expertise and a congressional sense of inadequacy. Congress generally acquiesced in the President's deployments of forces and in his executive agreements. Later, a growing practice of informal consultations between the President and congressional leaders disarmed them as well as members of Congress generally, and

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I would like to present a defense of the institution of the Presidency and its powers. My argument is quite simple: a weakened Presidency weakens America's ability to defend itself and protect its interests abroad. Americans risk stripping away the President's powers, without seeming to realize that they have no other institution to whom those powers can be transferred.

American policy has frequently been beset by the realization that we have not one, but two governments in Washington—presidential and congressional. We have not yet settled the question of their relative powers to manage either the nation's domestic policies or to conduct its international affairs.

In matters of domestic policy, I think this conflict between the branches can produce a fruitful tension that strengthens U.S. policies. But when this contest reaches to the *conduct* of foreign affairs, the struggle between the President and Congress is frequently nothing short of disastrous.

These different effects stem from the different pace and tempo of domestic- and foreign-policy making. Domestic policy ideally is characterized by debate,

# In Defense of the Presidency

By Caspar W. Weinberger

deliberation and a search for consensus. Forging national priorities from the many divergent interests represented in the Congress takes time. Congressional action is *deliberate* in both senses of the word.

As the Framers of our Constitution knew, it is often best to subordinate speedy decision making to the more laborious business of consensus building. Giving voice to the nation's diversity of interests is one of Congress's primary functions.

An extended dialogue between Congress and the President on the direction of domestic affairs simply brings a new perspective to the discussion. Such a dialogue usually does nothing to damage any emerging consensus, and it may even help produce agreement.

But in the sphere of international affairs, while Congress plays a vital part in helping articulate the broad goals of the nation's foreign policy, the *conduct* of international affairs is a very different matter. In that sphere, it is the President who is not only best suited to the task of advancing U.S. interests, but is the only locus for effective and decisive action. The Congress, by its very design, is not capable of effective executive action.

What the United States as a nation must achieve is clear: security and the advancement of American interests in the world. But the ability to set this agenda is far more limited than it is in the sphere of domestic politics. What Americans must do to defend their national and international interests is governed—to a great extent—by external forces and events, over which there is no control and which seldom wait for nations to act. Frequently there is little or no time for debate.

If we fail to take timely action, we do more than send our allies and enemies a signal of indecision. We risk blundering even more deeply into danger, by losing the

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helped confirm presidential authority to act without formal congressional participation. Often, Congress quickly ratified or confirmed what the President had already done, such as the decision in 1950 to fight in Korea. And repeatedly Congress delegated its own huge powers to the President in broad terms so that he could later claim to have acted under congressional authority as well as his own, as in the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution of 1964, which in effect legitimated the Vietnam War.

In America's legalist-constitutional political culture, practice was early undergirded by doctrine. In support of his argument that President Washington had authority to declare the United States neutral in the war between England and France, Alexander Hamilton read the clause in the Constitution, "The Executive Power shall be vested in a President," as a grant to the President of all the execu-

tive power of the United States—which for Hamilton included all foreign-affairs power—except as otherwise expressly provided. Madison strongly disagreed and he, I think, had the better of the argument from text and intent, but history has tilted toward Hamilton.

Other constitutional principles developed. In addition to his famous imprints on constitutional jurisprudence made as chief justice of the Supreme Court, John Marshall, while he was still a member of the House of



best opportunity for early and effective action.

The Framers of the U.S. Constitution knew this well, and placed the power for the actual conduct of international affairs in the hands of the executive. In contrast to the Congress, the prime characteristic of the Presidency—to use the Framers' language—is *energy*, or the capacity for prompt action. That energy stems from the single executive who, as commander in chief and chief executive, is charged with the ultimate decision-making authority—and assumes accountability for those decisions. Even the Founding Father most wary of excessive executive power, Thomas Jefferson, assumed the President's primacy in international affairs. "The transaction of business with foreign nations is executive altogether," Jefferson advised George Washington in 1790. "Exceptions [to the executive power]"—the Senate's role in treaty making, Congress's power to declare war—"are to be construed strictly," according to Jefferson.

But today the climate in Congress is far different. There is no sign that in attempting to assume a greater role in foreign policy, the Congress understands itself to be embarking on a radical redesign of the separation of powers. Very few members of Congress see any danger in seizing control of the smallest and largest details of the nation's foreign and defense policies.

In fact, Congress increasingly gives sway to 535 voices, all of them sovereign. This is wonderful for debate. But when the time comes to act, this debate frequently dead-ends in indecision, or issues in statutes worthy of the Delphic oracle. And in the conduct of foreign affairs, indecision, delay and frequent shifts in policy dispirit allies and invite aggression from adversaries.

The framework for free government crafted in 1787 in Philadelphia has proven remarkably durable. Nevertheless, history constantly reminds us that the Constitution left many of the great political questions unsettled. That is not a defect or some kind of imperfection that one must rectify or—failing that—to which we must resign ourselves. In fact, it is probably the

single greatest proof of the Framers' vast political wisdom. The Framers knew that man cannot lay down laws to govern all circumstances—and nowhere is this more true than in the arena of international affairs. That is why the Constitution grants the President broad executive power sufficient to fulfill his oath of office to "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution."

But the exercise of that power will always produce controversy. Americans are destined to live with the continual working out of great constitutional questions, especially ones involving the boundaries of the powers between the three branches of government.

But, contrary to the political maxim that power abhors a vacuum, it is simply *not* the case that powers removed or stripped away from one branch will find a home in another. Power can be dissipated and lost. There are some tasks one branch can perform that others simply cannot.

My concern is that the Congress will be successful in wresting responsibility for the conduct of foreign affairs from the President, without itself being able to discharge those responsibilities. That would leave the nation rudderless, without any effective leadership in foreign affairs, without any consistent course of action.

The Framers wished the President to be free to act, and to be accountable for his actions to the people—including their representatives in Congress. But accountability is not subservience. It should be plain that prompt and unambiguous action is impossible for a nation ruled by two governments. If Americans are to maintain a clear and considered defense of their interests abroad, it is imperative that they speak to allies and adversaries with a single voice.

Ours is a time when international events have never moved more quickly, or called for such instant responses. As a result, it is more essential today than at any point in history to preserve that power of a vital Presidency. If Americans wish to preserve and protect their interests abroad, they must preserve the full powers of the Presidency.

Representatives, declared that the President was the "sole organ of the nation in its external relations, and its sole representative with foreign nations." Others, including Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, blended Hamilton's "executive power" and Marshall's "sole organ" and built on them. In our century some Presidents seem to have assumed that the President himself can determine the foreign policy of the United States, communicate that policy as "sole organ," implement it as "the executive" and enforce

it as commander in chief.

What I have described developed slowly and not without resistance and occasional retreat. Congress has never formally adopted or approved the large conception of the presidential office as it developed, though it generally acquiesced in that conception. Early Presidents did not press their

claims too far and, even with growing partisanship, Congress did not feel a need to challenge many presidential assertions.

As Presidents claimed more, congressmen—and not only those of an opposing political party—sometimes objected. U.S. constitutional-political history is punctuated by exchanges between Congress and the executive, and between spokesmen for their respective claims. Against Hamilton, members of Congress and its supporters have cited James Madison



and Thomas Jefferson, insisting that the President has only the few specific powers expressly granted him, narrowly construed, and that in foreign as in domestic affairs Congress is primary and supreme. The President, they were prepared to agree, is the sole organ of communication, but it is Congress that largely decides the policies to be communicated. The President is the commander in chief of the armed forces, but it is Congress that decides what forces he shall command, whether the United States shall go to war, whether the arms and armies of the United States shall otherwise be deployed and, if so, where and for what purpose.

Sometimes congressional spokesmen have claimed that constitutional uncertainties were intended to be resolved, and omissions supplied, by applying the principle of division between legislative and executive power expressed in the Constitution: Congress makes foreign policy, and the President executes congressional policy and conducts foreign relations in accordance with that policy. But clearly that is not an accurate description, of either the constitutional blueprint or the U.S. government during the past 200 years. In foreign affairs the President does not merely execute

what Congress prescribes. The President makes foreign policy—and law—when he makes a treaty (with the consent of the Senate). What is more, the distinction between making foreign policy and conducting foreign relations is essentially empty: the President makes foreign policy by conducting foreign relations.

Congress has been more successful when it has argued the breadth of its own powers and their supremacy. Congress has insisted that, whatever the President may do on his own initiative when Congress is silent, he may not act contrary to the wishes of Congress when they are expressed by law in the exercise of the legislature's broad powers over war and commerce with foreign nations and its power to spend for the common defense and the general welfare. Congress has not attempted to define or to regulate the content of executive agreements, but, in the Case Act of 1972, Congress insisted that it be informed of all such agreements. (The executive branch has apparently complied.) Congress has regulated and provided for oversight of intelligence activities. In the principal continuing controversy over presidential uses of force, the War Powers Resolution, adopted by Congress in 1973,

declared that the President has constitutional power to introduce U.S. forces into hostilities only in the case of an attack on the United States or its armed forces; and, after declaring the President's own constitutional authority to be narrow, Congress asserted authority to regulate strictly the President's use of force in hostilities.

**W**here has this debate left us today? Emphasis on unresolved issues should not obscure the fact that large dispositions in the Constitution are not disputed in principle (though Presidents, and occasionally Congress, sometimes resent and resist them). Presidents have not made and do not make laws relating to foreign affairs. They do not appropriate money or spend funds without congressional appropriation. They do not make treaties without Senate consent. They have not asserted the power to declare war or to go into full-scale war without congressional authorization.

For its part, Congress has not presumed to make treaties or appoint ambassadors. And by extrapolation from the Presidency's express powers, supported by references to Hamilton and Marshall, Presidents have established beyond dispute an additional area of exclusive authority: Congress cannot tell the President to recognize or not to recognize, or to maintain or not to maintain diplomatic relations with, a foreign government; whom to appoint as ambassador; whether to negotiate a treaty, or whether to make or not to make a treaty or an executive agreement intimately related to the diplomatic function; or how to conduct a campaign in a war that Congress has authorized.

For the rest, we are in Justice Jackson's twilight zone, in which President and Congress "may have concurrent authority or in which its distribution is uncertain." In the twilight zone, whether because authority is uncertain or concurrent, both Congress and the President have sometimes claimed authority to act when the other is silent. Congress and the President sometimes race for the initiative, though in general the initiative is with the President, and Presidents have pressed their claims far. But it is commonly accepted by students of the Constitution, if not always by Presi-

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dents, that except in the small zone of exclusive presidential authority, Congress acting under its broad powers can prohibit or regulate what the President does, and the President (and all the President's men) may not flout congressional directives. Presidents, in fact, have rarely asserted power to act when Congress has directed them not to, or to disregard conditions imposed by Congress on their actions. If the President presses his resistance, Congress can usually prevail, in constitutional principle and in governmental practice, if only because it holds the purse strings—provided it has the will to pull them.

Students of constitutional law and politics might add that the foreign-affairs issues that agitate congressional-presidential relations reflect more than the uncertainties of the twilight zone. There are issues of constitutional interpretation as to the scope of the powers that are explicitly allocated to one branch or the other. Some tensions between Congress and the President are the inevitable (and perhaps desirable) consequences of the separation of powers. Some tensions, perhaps, reflect unhappiness with what the Constitution prescribes, perhaps a sense that the prescriptions of the 18th century are not sufficient to the 21st.

Consider the consequences of these constitutional developments in our day:

*The war power.* In the War Powers Resolution, Congress declared its view that the constitutional authority of the President to use the armed forces in "hostilities" is strictly limited: he can do so only when there is an attack on the United States or its armed forces. In addition, Congress commanded advance consultation and prompt reporting of any engagement of U.S. forces, and automatic termination after 60 (or 90) days, or at any time when Congress so directs by resolution (not subject to presidential veto). Presidents have challenged the resolution in principle, have some-

times made gestures of acquiescence, and have generally disregarded it. I think that the War Powers Resolution is sound in constitutional principle but that it demands rethinking and rewriting.

Above all, the resolution suffers gravely from a lack of any definition of *hostilities*; yet the correctness of Congress's statement of presidential power and the constitutionality of the regulatory provisions and their practical application may hang on how that term is defined. It is late in the day for Congress to challenge every deployment of troops not expressly authorized by Congress, and in today's world any unit of U.S. armed forces anywhere may be an object of hostility and become involved in "hostilities." On the other hand, in some deployments of U.S. forces Presidents have engaged in or risked war and placed themselves, I think, within the purview of the war powers of Congress. If the War Powers Resolution is to survive and flourish, Congress will have to redefine its scope as well as some of its regulations, and establish institutions and procedures to make it work.

It seems to be commonly assumed that the issues of nuclear deterrence and of what to do if deterrence fails are "executive altogether." It may seem hopelessly anachronistic to attempt to squeeze issues of nuclear policy into a constitutional framework designed for 18th-century wars. But the original framework and its allocations of authority are all we have to work with and live by. If we take the Constitution seriously, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the original reasons for leaving the powers of war to Congress apply, *a fortiori*, to nuclear exchange. In some circumstances, surely, there is both opportunity and justification for the operation of the original constitutional conception: consideration and decision by Congress. Should not Congress be exploring and planning for different contingencies, distinguishing those in which decision must be left to the President from those in which doing so contradicts the constitutional conception, and provide for congressional decision in some form wherever possible?

*The spending power.* Issues of defense spending and foreign aid are es-

entially not differences as to what the Constitution provides. The Constitution expressly gives Congress the power to tax and provide for the common defense and the general welfare. The President can only "recommend" to the Congress "such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient"; the President can propose, Congress disposes (subject to presidential veto, which it can override). Spending for the common defense, for "raising and supporting" the armed forces, allows the President's experts, military and civilian, to develop defense strategies—but Congress has to be persuaded to enact and implement them. Congress, for its part, is unhappy being a mere rubber stamp. To provide itself some role, Congress has had to develop its own experts and expertise. Inevitably, however, the role of Congress is often marginal, hardly what the Framers contemplated.

Similar, though less acute, is presidential impatience with the power of Congress to spend for the general welfare. In foreign relations, it is accepted that providing for the general welfare includes the appropriation of large sums for foreign aid. Again, Presidents plan and promise, but Congress has to be persuaded, in general or in particular cases. Again, the roles are substantially reversed from what I think the Framers intended.

*The treaty power.* The power to make treaties is the President's, but he cannot dispense with the Senate. Forty years ago President Truman negotiated the U.N. Charter and the North Atlantic Treaty, but he had to involve the Senate intimately in those negotiations and he was able to conclude those treaties only when the Senate consented. Later, other Presidents concluded an Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, the Panama Canal Treaty and a Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, but they were only ratified after Senate scrutiny and consent, and only subject to conditions which the Senate imposed.

The Senate has sometimes sold that



consent dear. Increasingly—since the disasters of the Versailles Treaty, which the Senate rejected, and other interwar agreements—the executive branch has attempted to determine in advance what the Senate will buy, to consult particular senators, to involve them in negotiations. But the Senate's perspectives on world affairs and the national interest are often different from those of the executive. More, better, earlier consultation with the Senate will surely improve the treaty-making process.

The Senate's consent to a treaty is constitutionally necessary, and for that purpose the Senate is entitled to know what the treaty means. If, as reportedly happened in respect of the 1972 ABM Treaty, the executive branch later seeks to interpret a treaty to an effect different from what it had told the Senate in seeking its consent, the executive would seem to be violating the constitutional conception. Such attempts by the executive invite the Senate to probe ambiguities and to express understandings with nearly paranoid scrupulousness. The President must be candid; the Senate must restrain itself.

Fear of circumvention of the Senate by presidential resort to executive agreements on his own authority is currently quiescent. The President has not resisted the demand of Congress to be fully informed of executive agreements after they are made, and there has been no recent challenge by the Senate to the constitutional propriety of any particular agreement that has been made. But the issue is always in the wings. There is always the possibility that Congress may deem a presidential promise to have been beyond his authority to make.

We have come a long way under the constitutional blueprint which the Framers ordained and established. The President was granted the power of a strong executive but has acquired much more. The Framers did not an-

ticipate, I think, how much legislation and spending would be determined by the fact that the President recommended them; that the President would become the many-headed executive branch, knowledgeable, expert and difficult for Congress to resist or to overrule. The Framers did not foresee the dangers inherent in leaving general policies to be executed by a President who also had the command of the armed forces. I do not think they foresaw the claims of Presidents to use the armed forces for broad foreign-policy purposes.

**T**his, I believe, is where we are after more than 200 years, under an 18th-century blueprint which has never been replaced, or formally amended in respects here relevant. The explicit constitutional allocations continue to govern. A large twilight zone continues to generate both uncertainty and competition. Congress can often prevail if it organizes, educates and mobilizes itself, but there are formidable obstacles to its doing so. Major issues of separation of power remain unresolved. We come down to deciding what kind of country America is and wishes to be. How should foreign affairs be run in a republic that has become a democracy?

After more than 200 years America is a democracy, subject to commitment to individual rights. It may be time, then, to begin to inject into the nation's constitutional jurisprudence the conception of American democracy, our dual democracy—a presidential democracy and a congressional democracy—giving each its due. In foreign affairs the President represents the United States, and the people of the United States, to the world. Congress represents the people at home, the sum of different groups, constituencies, interests (general and special). The President leads; Congress legislates.

For me, seeing the President and Congress under the aspect of democracy—an aspect quite different from the Framers' perspective—nevertheless confirms their judgment, and the national experience over 200 years, in surprising measure. In respect of the government's authority to use force—the perennial and paramount

issue—in my view, the dual democracy tends to confirm the original division. The Constitution gave the decision as to whether to put the country into war to Congress; the Framers intended for the President only the power to defend the United States if the country were suddenly attacked. That division still seems wise, and responsive to popular wishes—the basis of authentic democracy. In nuclear strategy, too, it is important that Congress be involved in advance planning, as well as in the ultimate decision, by the best procedures Congress can devise. We need processes that will bring to bear wisdom as well as expertise, and the authentic consent of the governed.

The Constitution was not a perfect realization of ideals, principles and plans but, in the words of historians Charles and Mary Beard, "a mosaic of everyone's second choices." It blends different notions of democracy: a democracy represented to the world by the President; an internal democracy represented by Congress, closer to the people, to constituents, to individuals, to issues. It also blends respect for representation with concern for effectiveness, for different kinds of effectiveness. The President provides leadership, commands information, expertise, speed, efficiency. Congress represents the people, its wider, soberer (more cautious) long-term values and judgments. Two hundred years have given Americans separation of powers *cum* democracy or, perhaps more accurately, differentiation of function mixed for democracy. Ideally, the representatives of the different kinds of democracy work together. Good government, as well as democracy, demands fewer decisions by one representative alone, for war or in peace. ♦



# AFRO-AMERICAN LITERATURE

## Black Consciousness and the Search for Identity

Twenty-five years ago Martin Luther King Jr. made his famous "I have a dream" speech before a huge crowd gathered at the Lincoln Memorial for the March on Washington. In the years since many have cited that event as the beginning of the activist phase of the civil-rights movement for blacks in the United States, a movement that soon was expanded to other minorities—women, Hispanics, the physically handicapped.

Today black Americans have assumed positions of leadership in every endeavor from politics and business to the arts and humanities. It is in the arts, especially literature, where in the last few decades a "black consciousness" has been most fully evolving. Certain themes recur. There is the search for an identity; the search for self-esteem in an often hostile social climate; the search for a language to express the richness of an oral culture. In exploring these elements of black consciousness, Afro-American writers (as some prefer to be called) have a strong historical sense that often takes them back to their ancestors' lives in the slave society of previous centuries. By delving into the complexity of Afro-American life past and present, they seek, in the words of literary critic Nathan Scott, not only to assist other black Americans "toward a deeper understanding of themselves, but also to be the agents of self-discovery for the

nation at large." In sum, their work is much more than "ethnic" or "minority" writing. It is an integral part of 20th-century literature in the United States, a literature that has always been a voyage of self-discovery for Americans of every color.

In the first article of this special section, "Novelists of Memory," professor, critic and novelist Charles Johnson presents an overview of the major black voices in current American fiction. Nine of these writers are pictured in the portfolio of photographs that follows. Novelist John Wideman offers some personal and ironical insights into the nature of black consciousness and of what it means to be considered an "Afro-American writer." Examining the career of one writer in detail, critic Hilary DeVries focuses on an acclaimed black dramatist with a profound historical sense, August Wilson, who in 1988 enjoyed the rare distinction of having two of his plays on Broadway at the

same time. The essay is illustrated with color photos of scenes from these and other of Wilson's plays. Finally, the special section concludes with a personal counterpoint by Professor Shelby Steele, "Black Consciousness in Perspective." Steele questions one of the basic themes of Afro-American writing—the idea that the color of the skin is the main touchstone of a black American's identity.

Novelist Toni Morrison



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# Novelists of Memory

**Like their predecessors of the Harlem Renaissance, black writers of the 1980s are extending the imaginative boundaries of American literature.**

By Charles Johnson

*From Toni Morrison's current Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Beloved*, to the satires of Ishmael Reed, black writers are creating some of the finest literature of our time. The sweep of their artistic ambition as they probe the roots of the black experience in America recalls the achievements of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, but their work draws on many ideas and literary traditions not previously associated with black writing. Most strikingly, the evolution of a broad cultural vision marks a departure from the separatism of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. If there is a predominant idea among contemporary black writers, it may be Al Young's conviction that "the individual human heart is more revolutionary than any political party or platform."*

*In this article, Charles Johnson introduces the most important fiction writers of the new renaissance and describes the best of their novels and stories. Johnson modestly overlooks his own work. He is a Guggenheim Fellowship recipient. His novels *Faith* and *the Good Thing* (1974) and *Oxherding Tale* (1982) earned widespread critical acclaim, and his collection of short stories *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* was nominated for the 1987 PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction. As director of the Creative Writing Program at the University of*

*Washington and fiction editor of The Seattle Review, Professor Johnson is also a literary critic of stature and experience. He succinctly sums up the importance of black literature by saying that it may be "the most exciting experiment in contemporary fiction...because here the cutting-edge questions of personal identity, our relationship to our forebears and the meaning of freedom are dramatically thrown into relief." This is, therefore, "a literature central to the ongoing effort to define the American experience of democracy in the modern age."*

During the last two decades remarkable and still uncharted transformations have taken place in the literature of black America. Once dismissed as "provincial" by white critics of another era, and plagued by poor sales and little publicity, the fiction of the finest Afro-American authors in the 1980s frequently appears on that perennial barometer of popularity, the best-sellers' list, receives critical acclaim and extensive classroom use, and is regarded by many as being the most exciting—as well as controversial—writing published today. Perhaps most significant of all, many of the preeminent leaders of this pioneering new fiction are black women who, as a group, were long the "invisible" authors in a literary tradition almost as old as the nation itself.

But even though black fiction has changed and, by virtue of this, is transforming the American novel and short story, it nevertheless brings to its present the artistic promise and problems, both political and esthetic,

of its past. In fact, the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and slave narratives of the 19th century are as much at the heart of this 1980s renaissance in black letters as the explosion of new thematic and technical directions taken by contemporary authors. In order to fully appreciate these changes, and how the past prefigured the present, we must look back to the first large-scale outpouring of Afro-American creativity, during the period between two world wars.

The word *renaissance* when applied to the 1920s is something of a misnomer. What came to pass, in point of fact, was the first genuine flowering of black fiction brought about by a unique ensemble of social changes. The most significant of these occurred when rural blacks, fleeing lynching and segregation in the South, migrated to urban centers like New York City's Harlem and found themselves side-by-side with Africans, northern blacks free since the Revolutionary War and liberal whites fascinated, during the jazz-and-gin-baby era, with black folkways. In other words, all the ingredients were present for the creation of a progressive, international black consciousness and culture. It was also the heyday of that great West Indian political showman, Marcus Garvey. Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association inspired Harlemites with a "Back to Africa" movement which, by the 1950s, would be succeeded by the separatist philosophy of the early Nation of Islam.

Recording these massive changes



in his essay "The New Negro" (1925), scholar Alain Locke reported that "the day of 'aunties,' 'uncles' and 'mammies' is equally gone. Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on....In the very process of being transported the Negro is being transformed." A key element for "the new Negro's" emergence, he noted, was the frequent return of writers like poets Langston Hughes and Claude McKay and satirist Wallace Thurman to black folk sources for inspiration. Two of these authors are critical for shaping the fiction of the 1980s. The first is Jean Toomer, whose only published book, *Cane* (1923), a hypnotic montage of poetry and short fiction, delivered a portrait of southern black life as so mythic and shot through with elemental mysteries that it clearly belongs in the tradition of American transcendentalism stretching back to Emerson and Thoreau. This is doubly so for his visionary poem, "Blue Meridian" (1936), a Whitmanesque work where Toomer envisions the American of the future as a spiritualized being destined to break all forms of false duality between blacks and whites, men and women. The other seminal author is Zora Neale Hurston, noted both for her groundbreaking anthropological work in *Mules and Men* (1935) and her beautiful use of southern folk material in such stories as "The Gilded Six-Bits" (1933) and her most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1939). Here, as in her other works, Hurston reveals herself to be a prophetic writer, fully 50 years ahead of her time in exploring the complex relationship between black men and women, and in using the most crucial Renaissance idea—the importance of the common folk—to portray the "new Negro" female on subtler levels than did her contemporaries.

Yet despite the astonishing fertility of the Harlem Renaissance, several forces brought it to an end—or perhaps to a 40-year interruption, if we consider the 1980s to be its continuation, as I shall argue here. One force was external—the Great Depression. The other was internal—a fickleness by the movement's white patrons,

such as arts promoter Carl Van Vechten, who encouraged the Renaissance writers because they considered the Negro to be a creature free of white men's cares during the Roaring Twenties. These years were characterized by America's moral fatigue after World War I, the popularity of Freud's idea that civilization was

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**Ralph Ellison's 'Invisible Man' is a picaresque masterpiece, conceived in an exuberant Hegelian spirit that blends several literary genres, from Mark Twain to William Faulkner, from the slave narrative to the surrealistic Kafkaesque parable. It is a tour de force of writing technique. Ellison gives our age a new metaphor for social alienation.**

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based on the repression of eros, and the notion that people of color were less inhibited and closer to natural rhythms—even to the subconscious—than their white brothers. As poet Sterling Brown noted in "A Century of Negro Portraiture" (1966), the stereotypical image of "the Exotic Primitive" reinforced during the '20s became as misleading about black life as the earlier racist myths of the contented slave and violent, bestial black created by Plantation School writers of the Old South like Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Dixon. Another decade would have to pass—one that saw the creation of the Federal Writers Project, which sponsored such talents as Richard Wright, Willard Motley, Ralph Ellison and Frank Yerby—

before an even newer image of black America entered our literature. It came in 1940 as an overnight best-seller called *Native Son*.

Richard Wright's brutal thriller about a black chauffeur who accidentally murders his employer's daughter wasn't merely the first best-seller by a black writer. It was also the birth of the black proletarian protest novel and the achievement of a new level of intellectual complexity in Afro-American storytelling. Many blacks, as it turned out, recoiled at the relentless wretchedness of the protagonist Bigger Thomas's life in southside Chicago, and argued that Wright had ignored positive features of black culture. For all these complaints, *Native Son* remains after almost 50 years our most phenomenologically successful portrait of inner-city poverty and dehumanization, and is responsible for inspiring a full generation of authors: Chester Himes; James Baldwin, who first criticized, then continued Wright's tradition of protest fiction from the decade of the 1950s until his death in 1987; John A. Williams; and Ralph Ellison, whose many-splendored *Invisible Man* (1952) stands at the summit of imaginative black writing in the 20th century. Correction: *Invisible Man* has repeatedly been selected, and rightly, as one of the 10 finest novels by any American, black or white, since World War II.

Clearly, *Invisible Man* is indebted to *Native Son* for certain themes, such as the social "invisibility" of black Americans and the "blindness" of whites to their individuality, and also for a few paradigmatic situations—for example, the relationship of blacks to modern mass social movements like Ellison's fictional Brotherhood; Ellison, however, conceives his picaresque masterpiece in an exuberant Hegelian spirit that blends several literary genres, from Mark Twain to William Faulkner, from the slave narrative to the surrealistic Kafkaesque parable, as he traces in chapters that rise and crest like separate short stories the progress of a nameless black student from one intellectual "posture" of 20th-century life to another. And, as if this were not enough, Ellison gives



our age a new metaphor for social alienation. It is a tour de force of writing technique. *Invisible Man* spills over with stylish set pieces: the opening chapters that satirize black colleges based on the accommodationist teachings of Booker T. Washington; the Harlem eviction scene in which every object reveals black history; Ras's monologue to Todd Clifton, which captures the essential thought of Black Nationalism in the style of Garvey; allusions to James Joyce and Sigmund Freud; and concerns spanning the Harlem Renaissance and years following it.

### Individual Vision

Almost everything one could want in a novel or artistic vision is here: humor, suspense, black history from which Ellison's vivid imagination teases forth truth beneath mere facts, and a rogues' gallery of grotesques. It is also here, as well as in his many essays and interviews from 1952 through 1988, that Ellison reiterates a point he feels we must never forget: "The thing that Americans have to learn over and over again is that they are *individuals* and they have the responsibility of individual vision."

If Ellison's protagonist could forget this as he "boomeranged" from one racial abuse to another, how much easier it was to forget the priority of "individual vision" in the tumultuous years following *Invisible Man's* publication. By the late 1960s, in a decade marked by political assassinations, an unpopular war and a growing new militancy represented by the rise of the Nation of Islam and its charismatic spokesman Malcolm X, the trend in black arts and letters shifted from individualism to the call for a communal art outlined by proponents of the Black Arts Movement, an outgrowth of the Black Power Movement. These changes, one sees in hindsight, were inevitable. The dominant themes in black literature were paranoia and genocide. The "evidence" for a black American holocaust seemed to many Afro-Americans irrefutable as new histories documented three centuries' worth of racial oppression. Chil-

dren were dynamited in a black church, and Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated at a motel in Memphis, Tennessee. It was a period when novelist John A. Williams could write powerfully, in *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967), of the secret, international "King Alfred" plan to squash African countries just breaking free of colonialism and to suppress inner-city riots in America. Sam Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1969) became the most unexpected best-seller of the early 1970s because, as one militant friend told me, young blacks read it to gain recipes for insurrection.

If blacks were to survive, according to the reasoning of the day, and if black culture was to be preserved, the artist must pull together with all people of the African Diaspora. Furthermore, many advocates of the Black Arts Movement proposed, in addition to the celebration of culture by people of color, the need to retreat from the deep, structural causes of racism: namely, individualism seen as selfishness, crude materialism and Anglophilia in all its diverse forms. It was, all in all, a call for a new American humanism—a new spirituality—very much in line with other varieties of "countercultural" thought in the air by 1968. Among the frontline fighters for this brave, new black art were the late John Oliver Killens, whose *The Cotillion* (1972) is a no-holds-barred comedy of racial manners cast in the black-nationalist mode; poetic talents like Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), the early Nikki Giovanni and a politically converted Gwendolyn Brooks; and, in theater, where the "communal" emphasis works better perhaps than in the novel, Ed Bullins and his mentor, the polymathic theoretician and playwright, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones).

More than any writer, Baraka is responsible for defining the style and syntax of cultural-nationalist poetics in the decade of the 1960s. He counseled young artists to bring back their talents to their communities, as he himself had done when he moved from a life as LeRoi Jones, the celebrated 1950s Beat Generation poet,

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**The moral obligation of the novels of memory—the effort of black authors to honor their elders and enshrine the meaning of their lives—serves as a transmission of the American past for future generations. On the larger literary landscape of the 1980s that transmission includes the recovery of black writers either overlooked or misunderstood during their own time.**

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to become an *imamu* (teacher), a prime mover in Newark politics and an indefatigable lecturer. His ever-evolving oeuvre includes numerous plays and collections of essays and poetry; a significant work on black music, *Blues People* (1963); a novel, *The System of Dante's Hell* (1965); political tracts; and ethical works like "A Black Value System" (1970). With poet Larry Neal he coauthored the controversial 1968 anthology *Black Fire* (recalling the Harlem Renaissance magazine *Fire*, which was intended to "burn up" old-fashioned ideas about blacks), and more will doubtlessly have been added to his unique and singularly important literary career by the time you read this.

But this astonishing phase of Afro-American literary history would develop its own limitations, the first and foremost of these being a tendency toward separatism that ran counter to the push for integration by the majority of blacks. Secondly, it teetered of-



ten toward "essentialism," or the belief in an inherent racial nature. Sadly, many subjects worthy of artistic treatment were bypassed if they did not seem immediately relevant to the political problems of the moment. In addition, the emphasis on promoting a distinct "black identity" often led in the work of many authors to one-dimensional portraits of whites as well as a highly selective reading of the African and American past that oversimplified the complexity of historical phenomena.

Fortunately, as interest in the Black Arts Movement came under criticism, something new was percolating in black fiction, a movement that would diversify and deepen the subject matter and style of Afro-American literature, indicating a return to Ellison's individual vision. For example, in his essay, "A Black Criterion" (1967), Clarence Major wrote that the black poet "must chop away at white criterion and destroy its hold on his black mind because seeing the world through white eyes from a black soul causes death....With the poem we must erect a spiritual nation we all can be proud of." No question that Major in the 1960s agreed with Baraka, whom he acknowledges in this esthetic statement. But soon thereafter Major's fiction underwent an extraordinary change, one fostered perhaps by his affiliation with the Fiction Collective, a cooperative publishing venture started in the early 1970s by a handful of "experimental" writers.

Easing back from black nationalism, Major began the steady, single-handed enterprise of interpreting for black American literature modernist techniques pioneered by James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and Samuel Beckett, Major's particular contribution being the esthetic interface between painting and prose expressions. For this he is especially well suited; he is himself a painter, ethno-lexicographer and poet, and in his principal experimental work, *Emergency Exit* (1979), all these strands are

orchestrated. Yet no one can easily categorize Major; his recent work, *Such Was the Season* (1987), returns to a more conventional narrative to tell a story of Atlanta politics through the voice of an elderly black woman, which proves, if nothing else, that since the 1960s Major considers all forms of fiction—and all subjects—to be proper fields for black artistic expression.

### Satire and Sentiment

Equally innovative in the way they interpret black life are Ishmael Reed and Al Young, two California-based novelists and coeditors of the literary journal *Quilt*. As early as 1967, Reed published his first novel, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, which a *Village Voice* reviewer praised for "opening up a new area of satire. He has the nerve to extend his range to the black world itself." Reed's free-wheeling style of social comedy, the first to appear since Wallace Thurman's barbed satire, *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), crackles throughout all his fiction, especially his best-known novel, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), a detective story set during the Harlem Renaissance, which is metaphorically treated as an epidemic of black creativity called "Jes Grew." As might be expected, Reed has championed innovative writers of all colors during his 21-year career, and has waged a one-man war against what he sees as the oversights of the East Coast publishing world—for example, the dismissal of black folk-art forms and popular fiction (detective stories, even soap operas), all forms Reed himself has worked with. Lately, he has also challenged what he sees as an antimale tendency in black feminist writers, debating supporters of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and publishing a novel satirizing them, *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986). Whatever his detractors may say of him, all must admit that Reed is a writer of acute originality and courage.

Al Young is also a comic writer, but in a gentler fashion. A veteran poet, free-lance journalist, musician and screenwriter currently at work on a film biography of Charlie Parker, Young is far more concerned with vivid character portrayals and positive emotions than social protest. In fact,

in a 1972 interview called "Statement on Aesthetics, Poetics, Kinetics," he explained that "I've always believed the individual human heart to be more revolutionary than any political party or platform." And so he demonstrates in novels like *Snakes* (1970), which chronicles the life of a young musician, and in his forthcoming *Seduction by Light*, a drama about blacks in Hollywood. He urges readers to remember those aspects of black life that balance the brutality of racism and the pain of dislocation. And it is no surprise that at a 1987 writers' conference where Young read from his autobiographical essay, "Unripened Light," the music he selected to accompany his work was that old favorite, "Accentuate the Positive."

This concern of Young's with the "individual human heart" is also found in two story collections by James Alan McPherson, a protégé of Ralph Ellison, whose Pulitzer Prize-winning *Hue and Cry* (1970) contributed to the revival of the American short story. In this first collection, in his second, *Elbow Room* (1977), and in such remarkable autobiographical writings as "Going Up to Atlanta" (1987), McPherson creates a vivid collection of white and black characters who, in their anguish and frustration, strike a universal chord of human suffering and redemption. Although not a prolific writer, nor a prose stylist, McPherson focuses his energies on brutally honest stories about white, black and interracial couples who betray one another, as in his story "Hue and Cry"; or upon militants who bully less politically committed blacks with guilt and self-loathing, in "Of Cabbages and Kings." In his most anthologized story, "A Solo Song: For Doc," he creates a moving tale of the black Pullman porters who provided a special form of service that helped make the railroads prosper before their employers, out of fear of these men, forced them to leave.

Despite the highly individual vision of these authors, something of the



communal approach of the 1960s remains, but with an unusual genealogical slant inspired by the popularity of Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976). This account of Haley's ancestors, it should be noted, didn't simply make finding one's history a fad—no, it gave to the 1970s an interpretative metaphor (and a positive one) as compelling as that provided by Ellison's *Invisible Man* two decades before. Both Haley's generation-spanning saga of the American descendants of African Kunte Kinte and Ernest Gaines's story of an old slave woman's triumph over oppression in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* laid the foundations for a new wing in black American fiction, what one might call the “novel of memory.” This is not Proustian remembrance by any means. For many black authors memory is a moral obligation, an effort to honor their elders and enshrine the meaning of their lives—biographies of quiet heroism and courage left out of white versions of history—in the theater of the novel, poem or play. Also significant is how these retellings of history extend the time-honored tradition of black autobiography, a form originating with the slave narrative and represented by such modern classics as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which Haley helped the influential Muslim leader compose.

Bear in mind that these praise songs for one's predecessors do not question the accuracy of memory, nor do they take as a theme the philosophical problem of history as an interpretative chore. For this we must turn to David Bradley's ambitious *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981), a stunning historical novel about the historical imagination itself. Among the new crop of “novels of memory,” *Chaneysville* is vividly distinguished by bringing readers the excitement and down-right mystery of uncovering the past. Its protagonist, John Washington, a black historian, is driven by his father's death and his white girlfriend's slave-owning predecessors to uncover a slave catastrophe that happened a hundred years ago in Pennsylvania, one hushed up by the locals and im-

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plicating men now come into prominence. Ploughing through a dense forest of documents, musty relics and “cold facts” that refuse to offer up their meaning, John discovers the hermeneutic or interpretative dimension of “History,” a shape-shifting phenomenon capable of changing before his eyes as he chases it. In other words, for the first time in black American fiction, history is viewed not as a *donnée* but as a human project that must be continually achieved, and then only provisionally, and not until all the black historian's imagination and passions are brought to bear on the task of creating a theory (fiction) linking all the fragments into a coherent pattern. In this sense, Bradley's novel, filled with fully detailed characters and research into Pennsylvania history, broadens the intellectual field prepared by *Roots* and becomes a remembrance novel for an entire region of America.

John Edgar Wideman, Bradley's onetime teacher and a former Rhodes

scholar, has also devoted himself to this quasi-biographical project. In “The Return of Albert Wilkes,” one of a triptych of narratives in *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983), his character Carl thinks, “If I don't wake up Homewood [the neighborhood in Pittsburgh where the author grew up] will be gone. If I run far away, the Homewood streets will disappear.” The theme of “returning home” is highlighted again and again in Wideman's five novels, his stories and *Brothers and Keepers* (1984), a biting meditation on the imprisonment of his brother for robbery (while he the novelist went on to success in the white world) and on the destinies that simultaneously divide and bond brothers. Even his brilliant essays on language counsel other writers that the black speech learned in childhood must not be lost when they are overtaken by worldly success and its official tongue, standard English. Not always an easy writer to read, given his frequent reliance on stream-of-consciousness techniques, Wideman writes fiction that is nevertheless a treasury—and transmission—of the American past for future generations.

On the larger literary landscape of the 1980s that transmission includes the recovery of black authors either overlooked or misunderstood during their own time. Thus, critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. has endeavored to make available, in the valuable 30-volume Shomburg Collection published by Oxford University Press, 19th-century narratives and popular novels written by black women authors. Gates's feat of excavation and reconstruction demonstrates that considerably more Afro-American literature was written a century ago than was imagined, and that black women were pivotal, not peripheral, to this work. Most important among the later rediscoveries is the fiction and folkloric research of Zora Neale Hurston, who after her brilliant career spent her last days in anonymity, her contributions to anthropology and literature ignored until vigorously championed by one of America's best-selling authors, Alice Walker.

Walker's third novel, *The Color Purple* (1982) looks back, as one might expect, to Hurston, then forward to black feminism in the post-civil-



rights period signaled in 1970 by the appearance of an important anthology, *The Black Woman*. At this time, and for 18 years to follow, a shift occurs in the character of fiction by black women. It emerges as a literature indebted to Hurston and dedicated to disclosing a social perspective long slighted in American letters yet linked in two ways to the earlier Black Arts Movement. On the one hand, it generally celebrates the community of women rather than individualism; and, on the other, it often presents a positive, spiritual image of the Afro-American female as a Conjure Woman—a modern-day black wizard and griot or tribal storyteller—open to magical, non-Western ways of thought and feeling.

### Three Sisters

These elements do not account, however, for the public excitement and controversy triggered by *The Color Purple*, especially by its film version directed by Steven Spielberg. Like a surgeon's probe, Walker's simple story about a southern girl abused by whites and black men, then lifted from oppression after learning her own strength (and after a lesbian encounter), became the focal point for problems festering in the black family. According to government statistics, half the black children born in the United States today are born to single parents, and half of these are teenagers, like Walker's heroine Celie at the beginning of the novel. Little wonder that Walker's protagonist could become emblematic of the concerns of black women in a period when drug abuse, AIDS and black male unemployment have so badly pressured the family, the fundamental social unit in the black world. It is for these sociological reasons, more so than for artistic ones, that Walker's novel stands at the pinnacle of women's writing in the 1980s. Her use of an epistolary form here is, for example, esthetically interesting, but she is not quite as convincing in delivering the attraction of single-gender affairs

as, say, James Baldwin in *Another Country* (1960), or the darker, political side of sexuality, which Gayl Jones uncovers so well in her novels *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva's Man* (1976).

However, the most gifted storyteller among the new women writers is, beyond all doubt, Gloria Naylor. Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), a collection of interlocking stories first published in *Essence* magazine, presents the lives of several black women abandoned or betrayed by their husbands, lovers or sons. Their experiential world is identical to those of Walker and Jones, and to the universe of seven scarred and scared black women in Ntozake Shange's 1975 play *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, where her characters describe how "bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma." But Naylor knows her women better as individuals; she slides easily from examining a welfare mother's triumph over despair after she sees a black production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to portraying a bot-tomed-out 1960s civil-rights worker who achieves sisterhood with her more conservative, often annoying mother. Her latest book, *Mama Day* (1988), praised as a positive love story set on an all-black island (and using a Conjure Woman motif), shows Naylor's ever-increasing tonal range and imagination.

These writerly virtues can also be found in the consummate prose mastery and lyrical narratives of America's most honored black writer, Toni Morrison. Her best book, *Beloved*, recipient of the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, was also, as it turned out, a lightning rod for literary controversy, first because it did not receive the National Book Award, then because 40 black writers and critics published an "open letter" in *The New York Times Book Review*, lamenting Morrison's being passed over for the Pulitzer Prize in previous years.

Like many of the "novelists of memory," Morrison interprets the slave past in *Beloved* in ways thoroughly consistent with the Black Arts period, thus sidestepping the social complexities and ambiguities found in Bradley's novel. Yet no one has offered,

sentence-by-sentence, a more painfully compelling and microscopically detailed account of the daily humiliation of 19th-century bondage than Morrison achieves in her story about a Medea-like woman who murders her daughter to save her from a slavemaster. Most interesting of all, Morrison renders this spell-inducing tale not in the naturalistic style of previous Afro-American novels about the Peculiar Institution of slavery but with the "magical realism" we have come to associate with Gabriel García Márquez, filling her protagonist's world with slavery's restless ghosts and luscious imagery that suggests enchantment hidden even in the most ordinary of things.

The writers of the new Afro-American renaissance reveal themselves to be as diverse and individual as their predecessors in the 1920s, though all are clearly united in the common task of examining the social and political forces that have shaped American culture—this, in vivid contrast to many of their white counterparts who in the 1980s retreated into "minimalism," or recording hermetically private lives with little connection to the nation's multicultural past or common future. Many oversights and oversimplifications inherited from the 1960s have, in books by the best of these writers, been replaced by broadening of the black cultural vision to include themes and literary traditions not previously associated with the "black" experience. For in their work it is precisely the nature—the imaginative boundaries—of racial life that is being tested in each new story, novel and play. If this is, on the whole, potentially the most exciting experiment in contemporary fiction, it is because here the cutting-edge questions of personal identity, our relationship to our forebears and the meaning of freedom are dramatically thrown into relief. As such, black literature has become, after a century of neglect, a literature central to the ongoing effort to define the American experience and the adventure of democracy in the modern age. ♦



# Nine Novelists

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“I think of myself as an ‘old-fashioned’ writer, primarily because my fictional models are ‘old-fashioned.’ Like the Victorians, I am interested in the basics of plot and character, less concerned with abstract ideas. It is my belief that the writers of novels should have no belief, that the idea of what is true is something that emerges from the writing, rather than being placed into it.”

—David Bradley

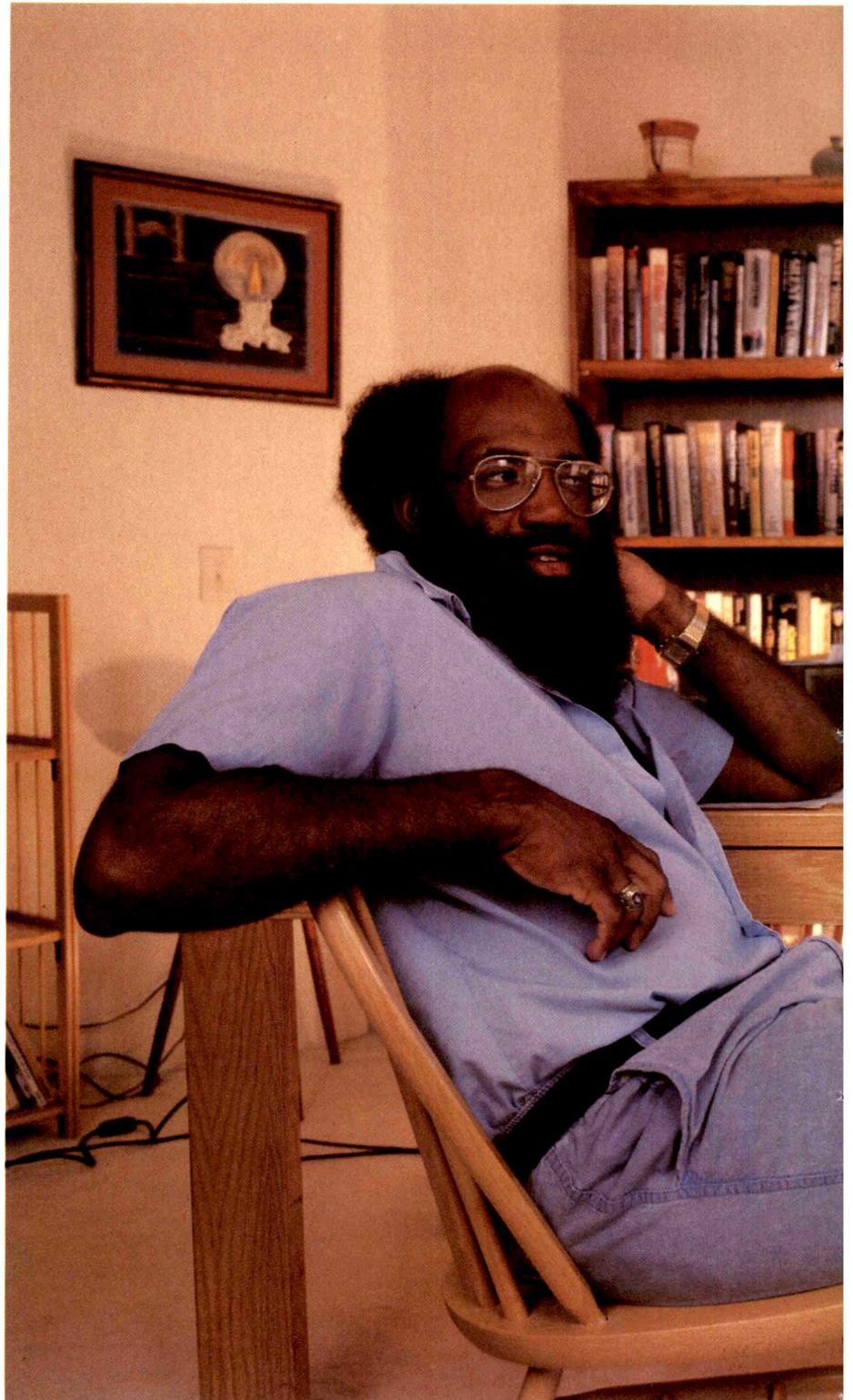
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**David Bradley**

b. Bedford, Pennsylvania, 1950

*South Street* (1975)

*The Chaneyville Incident* (1981)





Photographs by Anthony Barboza





**“As a black male writer, sometimes you have to be strident to get your point across, to get somebody to pay attention.”**

**—Ishmael Reed**

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**Ishmael Reed**

b. Chattanooga, Tennessee, 1938

*The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967)

*Yellow Back Radio Broke Down* (1969)

*Mumbo Jumbo* (1972)

*The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974)

*The Terrible Twos* (1982)

*Reckless Eyeballing* (1986)





**Al Young**

b. Ocean Springs, Mississippi, 1939

*Snakes* (1970)

*Sitting Pretty* (1976)

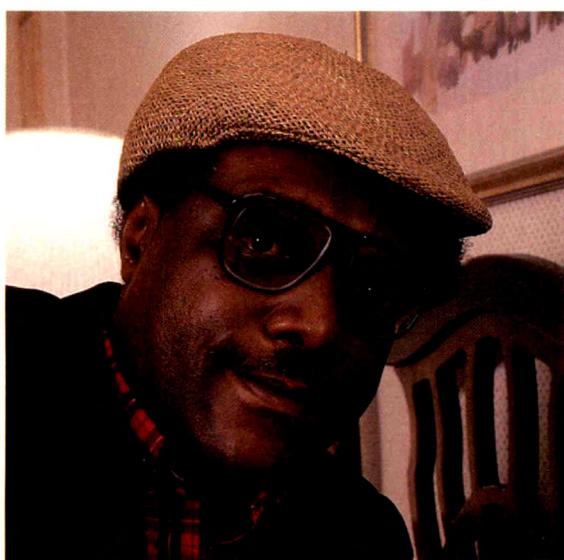
*Things Ain't What They Used to Be* (1987)



**“I wanted to become a writer because I felt that my presence as a black woman and my perspective as a woman in general had been underrepresented in American literature.”**

**—Gloria Naylor**

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**James Alan McPherson**

b. Savannah, Georgia, 1943

*Hue and Cry* (1970)

*Elbow Room* (1977)

**Clarence Major**

b. Atlanta, Georgia, 1936

*Reflex and Bone Structure* (1975)

*Emergency Exit* (1979)

*Such Was the Season* (1987)

*Surfaces and Masks* (1988)



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**Gloria Naylor**

b. New York, New York, 1950

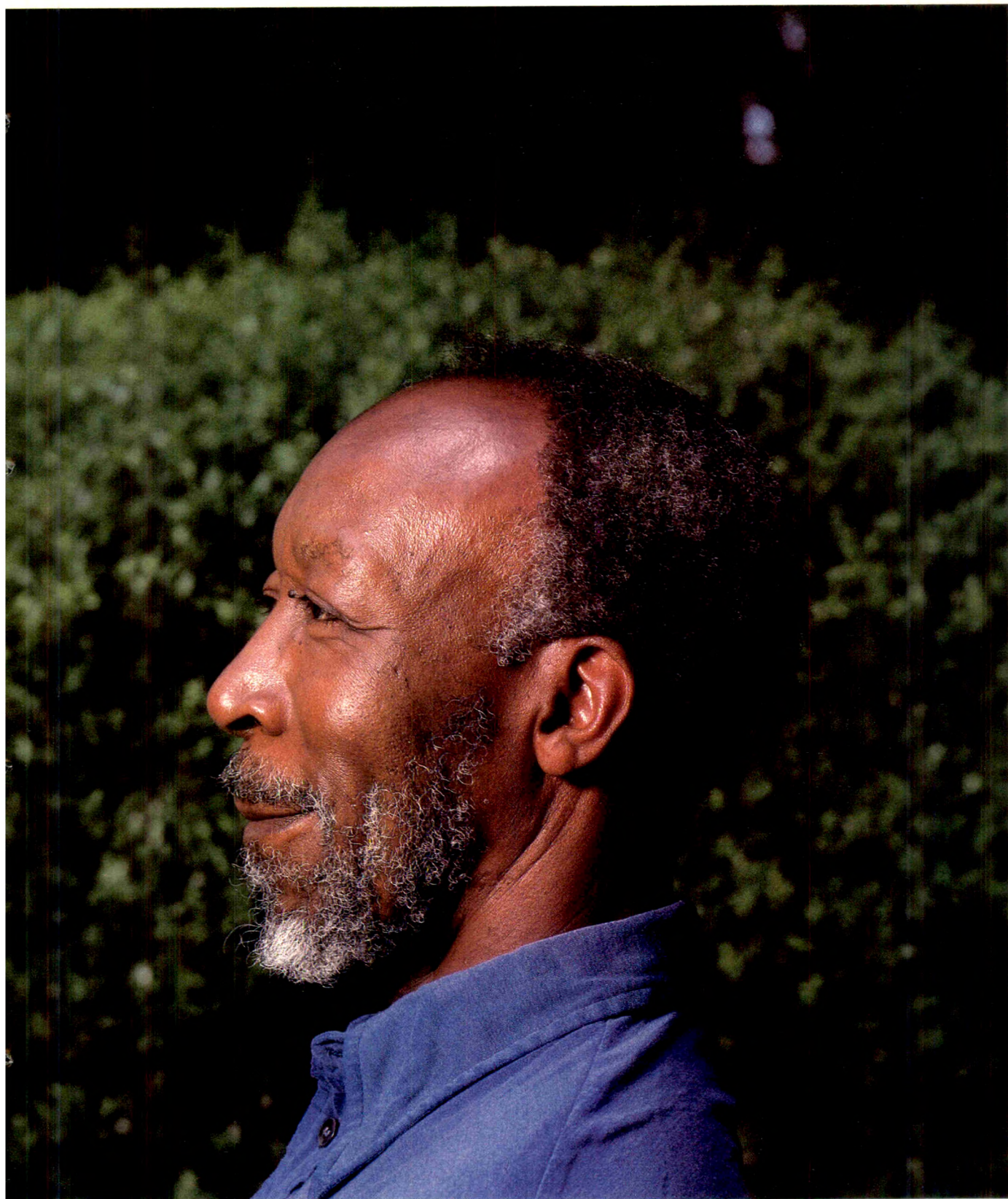
*The Women of Brewster Place* (1982)

*Linden Hills* (1985)

*Mama Day* (1988)







**John A. Williams**

b. Jackson, Mississippi, 1925

*The Angry Ones* (1960)

*The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967)

*!Click Song* (1982)

*Jacob's Ladder* (1987)



**“I examine minutely the place I come from,  
repeat its stories, sing its songs, preserve its language  
and values, because they make me what I am  
and because if I don’t, who will?”**

**—John Wideman**

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(c) 1988 E. Loren Soderberg

**Alice Walker**

b. Eatonton, Georgia, 1944

*Once* (1968)

*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970)

*In Love and Trouble* (1973)

*Meridian* (1976)

*You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981)

*The Color Purple* (1982)

**John Wideman**

b. Washington, D.C., 1941

*A Glance Away* (1967)

*Hurry Home* (1969)

*The Lynchers* (1973)

*Hiding Place* (1981)

*Damballah* (1981)

*Sent for You Yesterday* (1983)

*Reuben* (1987)









# The Magic of the Word

**Like his ancestors,  
the Afro-American writer shapes  
English to his own designs.**

By John Wideman

*The English that black Americans speak embraces the distinct history out of which it evolved. Its structure evokes grammar and words Africans brought to America, and its multi-layered ironies remind us of the strategies that slaves developed when using the language of their captors. In these excerpts from an essay, novelist John Wideman observes that in creating the English of great literature, the Afro-American writer need not turn his back on the language or stories of his people.*

*Many of Wideman's books draw inspiration from Homewood, the black neighborhood in Pittsburgh where he grew up. His novel Sent for You Yesterday—the third volume in his "Homewood Trilogy"—won the 1984 PEN/Faulkner Award. His memoir Brothers and Keepers covers the same ground in an attempt to come to terms with a younger brother who did not escape the ghetto traps of drugs and crime. A former Rhodes scholar, Wideman is a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. His most recent novel is Reuben.*

**A**t a certain point in my writing career, after I had done three books, I made a decision. I wanted to reach out to readers that the earlier works had perhaps excluded. I wanted to get everybody's ear. I had in mind a book for people familiar with America, with the technique and history of the novel—a book that audience could appreciate and applaud and relate to the Great Traditions, if there really are such things. But at the same time a book my brothers, sister, aunts, uncles, cousins, mother and father would want to read. And in my mind it became quite clear that I wouldn't be writing down to a black audience. My people's lives embrace the whole range of human experience. In fact, the language they speak, refined and tested by centuries of racial oppression and racial assertion, offers a unique vision of America. So it wasn't a question of condescending to a less educated set of readers, but of becoming more ambitious.

Afro-Americans must communicate in a written language which in varying degrees is foreign to our oral traditions. You learn the language of power, learn it well enough to read and write, but its form and logic cut you off, separate you from the primal authenticity of your experience, experience whose meaning resides in the first language you speak, the language not only of words but gestures, movements, rules of silence and expressive possibilities, of facial and tactile understanding, a language of immediate, sensual, intimate reciprocity, of communal and self-definition.

Does an Afro-American necessarily lose contact with an authentic self if

he or she decides to tell a story in print, in a second acquired tongue? Are the only options silence or fatal compromise?

For hundreds of years black people have been speaking English. Beginning as a pidgin or trade language on the west coast of Africa, then transformed to a Creole as a second generation of Africans was born on American soil, the English that black people speak has a distinct history, intertwined but always systematically in tension with the standard variety of English spoken by imaginary mainstream Americans.

In simple terms, the "inside" of black speech is just as important as its outside. One highly developed aspect of black speech and Afro-American oral traditions is the means by which its users can signify how they feel about what they're saying. Dual messages are transmitted in a single speech act. Play is the esthetic, functional manipulation of standard English to mock, to create irony or satire or double entendre, to signify meanings accessible only to a special segment of the audience. Play creates a distinctly Afro-American version of English; the speaker acknowledges to himself and announces to his audience that he's not taking the language of the slave-master altogether seriously. But the play is serious business.

Learning English to survive would have been necessary, but inside the slave's mind a natural resistance, a balkiness, fear, suspicion, even hatred of the new language would condition the learning process. A deep intuitive understanding of the fact that there's no place, no room for me inside this thing, this language that is one more cruel weapon my captors wield against me. Recall Caliban's plight in *The Tempest*. The structure of an English pidgin reflects laws of linguistic change, but it also mirrors the dynamics of the social context in which it evolved. The language created in this crucible must not be viewed simply as a clumsy attempt to master the sounds and syntax of English; it should also be seen as a record of the circumstances of its birth, a vehicle



captive Africans employed to express their feelings toward English, which is not so much spoken as played with.

This process of symbolic abstraction, of creating verbal icons, is basic to black versions of English. Africans took English sounds and with variation in tempo, rhythm, tone and timbre transformed them. Pushing English in the direction of their more tonal African languages, new sense evolved as well as new sounds. Play reinforced a tendency to draw out the music buried within English—rhyme, interpolation of African syllables and words or just plain scat-singing nonsense marked this African stylization of the speech of their captors. The process parallels the magic jazz singer Billie Holiday performed on the banal tunes and lyrics of Tin Pan Alley. The testimony of contemporary Africans who speak Wes Cos or Kriol or pidgin, West Indian fancy talk, the oral narratives of ex-slaves, contemporary narratives collected from prisons, bars, street corners and the working place, as well as rap records and the folk-derived forms of Afro-American music, all testify to the fact that black speech is not simply faulty English but a witness to a much deeper fault, a crack running below the surface, a fatal flaw in the forms and pretensions of so-called civilized language.

A fiction writer is not a slave, he or she is a participant in a literary as well as an oral culture. Most black writers are impressively fluent in a variety of dialects: black, white, genteel, literate and many registers in between. Yet just as the slave's oral pidgin English was English transformed by his original African language and the master-slave relationship, the black writer's English, if examined closely, will reveal its sources in Afro-American culture, a culture that has been generated partly as a response to racism. If he wished to survive, the slave was forced to learn the sounds and syntax of English. If black writers wish to publish, we have to learn the grammars of 20th-century American culture and adjust our literate speech to their constraints: economic, political, moral, esthetic. Whatever individuality, whatever freedom of expression either writers or slaves achieve can be illuminated by viewing what they say

against the systemic net of restrictions designed to inhibit their voices.

The terrible thing is that as writers or critics we are forced into certain kinds of choices, choices laden with values the writer doesn't necessarily hold. A critic can argue, "Wideman is a good writer; he uses Afro-American folklore, he knows this or that about his heritage and culture." The critic can make that argument, show it in the work and pat me on the back, but that doesn't get me out of the ghetto. Even if I've accomplished what the critic ascribes to me—and surely that is enough—there is still an implied, invidious comparison: "OK, Wideman does fine with Afro-American stuff, but the real writers are doing thus and so...." To protect ourselves as critics and artists, we are forced to jump back and forth, measure ourselves against an imaginary mainstream, define what we are doing in somebody else's terms. One thing for sure: it is a terrible bind.

The historical problem is unavoidably there, and how you solve it creates a sort of "out of the frying pan into the fire" dilemma. There is an Afro-American tradition. There are Afro-American writers working right now; it makes sense to talk about us as a group. It is natural, enlightening, intelligent to approach the work that way, but at the same time, to do so perpetuates the whole wrongheaded notion of looking at things in terms of black and white, and in our culture this implies not simply a distinction, but black inferiority. In academia, Mr. Dewy-Eyed Optimistic (who is really Mr. Turn-Them-Back in disguise) believes that the purpose of Afro-American literature classes is remedial, a fine-tuning of the curriculum, and argues that the millennium will arrive when American literature classes include *Invisible Man*. The real challenge of Afro-American culture gets lost. It's not a question of making a little more room in the inn but tearing the old building down, letting the tenants know their losses are such that no one is assured of a place, that the notion of permanently owning a place is as defunct as the inn.

When someone asks if I like being called an Afro-American writer, its almost like asking which of my names I prefer. When I play basketball, some of the young guys at the university gym call me Doc, and I like that. Back in Pittsburgh at Mellon Park playground, some of the old guys call me Spanky; that's OK too. But I don't want other people to call me those names. Names are contextual. They make sense in certain situations, but the same names are insulting in others.

In the fiction I have published during the last several years, I have been trying to recover some lost experience, to re-educate myself about some of the things I missed because the world was moving so fast. My books returned to Homewood and settled in. I am trying to listen again. Writing is a means of preservation for the community, the ethnic group, as well as the individual artist.

Cultures, ethnic groups, nations are fragile, mortal. A whole way of life can disappear. For a long time I'd entertained a secret fear about black people, black culture in the United States, a creeping, exhausting sense that a link was being severed, a connection lost. The main currents of black life had little to do with whatever was unique, special about Africans who had been transplanted to the New World, Africans who'd experienced their Time on the Cross but who'd never lost touch with the old ways, the ancestral spirits that animated Afro-American prayers, music and motion. I had a sense that after all the suffering and struggle, we were losing with a whimper what no one had been able to steal, crush or beat out of us. The melting pot would have its way. Slowly, surely the monoculture would claim us.

Novelist N. Scott Momaday has pointed out the precariousness of any oral culture, how the tales and ways of his Native American people have always been just one generation from extinction. If each generation doesn't learn and pass on the stories and customs, the vitality of ethnic traditions ends. As a fiction writer, a critic and a teacher I am trying to forge bulwarks and bridges, protect and share what is uniquely mine and yours. I depend upon the magic of the word. ♦





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# The Drama of August Wilson

**Listening to the voices of earlier generations,  
a gifted playwright re-creates the history of his people.**

By Hilary DeVries

*In March 1988, when Joe Turner's Come and Gone opened to rave reviews and joined the award-winning Fences on Broadway, August Wilson became the first black playwright to have two plays running concurrently on the handful of New York stages that defines success in American theater. The historical note is appropriate. Like Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, which was Wilson's first Broadway production, and The Piano Lesson, his current work, Fences and Joe Turner belong to a proposed cycle of 10 plays that will portray the lives of black Americans in each decade of the 20th century.*

*Wilson's writing has moved black theater beyond the stage of confrontational "protest plays" that predominated in the 1960s and '70s. As Time critic William A. Henry III says, August Wilson "movingly evokes the evolving psychic burden of slavery but without laying on guilt or political harangues....Like the blues music he threads through them, his plays transcend ethnicity."*

*Hilary DeVries is the drama critic for The Christian Science Monitor.*

**In Fences, Wilson's second Broadway production, James Earl Jones (left) portrays a former Negro League baseball player.**

In August Wilson's most recent play, *The Piano Lesson*, the young protagonist Boy Willie declares: "That's all I wanted. To sit down and be at ease with everything. But I wasn't born to that. When I go by on the road and something ain't right, then I got to try and fix it." The speaker is the son of a slave determined to transform his family's racial legacy into a self-determining future; but the words also bear witness to their author's aspirations as one of the nation's leading black playwrights.

In the black American theatrical tradition, often distinguished as much by political circumstance as individual accomplishment, August Wilson has emerged as a compelling new voice. Chronicling the history of black Americans through the 20th century, Wilson draws on his background as a published poet to enrich his more recently honed talents as a dramatist. His three best-known plays, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, evince both their author's fecund use of language and a storyteller's narrative touch.

The plays' cumulative intent, however, is pedagogic as well as expository. Wilson describes his artistic agenda as an attempt to "concretize" the black American tradition, to demonstrate how that tradition "can sustain a man once he has left his father's house." Indeed, the theme that surges through Wilson's work is the need for black Americans to forge anew their identity, an identity that is at once African and American.

In the seven years he has been writing plays—his first efforts resulted in a handful of seldom-produced one-

acts—Wilson has undertaken an ambitious, systematic project: each work is to be set in a different decade from 1900 to the present. "I'm taking each decade and looking back at one of the most important questions that blacks confronted in that decade and writing a play about it," says Wilson. "Put them all together and you have a history."

The dramatic chronicle that has resulted thus far is peopled by striking protagonists marked by the eras in which they lived: Levee, the impetuous young trumpeter of *Ma Rainey*, struggles to survive in the white entertainment world during the 1920s; Loomis, the forbiddingly Dickensian protagonist of *Joe Turner*, fights to regain his identity after seven years of forced labor in the early 1900s; half a century later, Troy, the tyrannical patriarch of *Fences*, rages at social injustice prefiguring the anger of the explosive '60s. Collectively they constitute Wilson's overt literary intent: "You should be able to see a progression through the decades from Loomis to Levee to Boy Willie to Troy." Says drama critic Ernest Schier, "August is a better chronicler of the black experience than Alex Haley [author of *Roots*]. In 40 years, he will be the playwright we will still be hearing about."

Ironically, Wilson has emerged at a time when few black American playwrights are finding and keeping a national audience. Nonetheless, after nearly two decades of writing both poetry and drama and four years of almost exclusive collaboration with director Lloyd Richards at two Connecticut theaters, the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center and Yale

Adapted from an article that originally appeared in *American Theatre* magazine, published by the Theatre Communications Group.



Repertory Theatre, Wilson is entering a new and broader arena.

In 1985, *Ma Rainey* was nominated for the Tony Award for best play, the "Oscar" of the New York theater. Two years later, *Fences* won four Tonies, including best drama, as well as the Pulitzer Prize for drama. In 1988, Wilson became the first black dramatist to have two plays running concurrently on Broadway: *Fences* and *Joe Turner*. Wilson's latest work, *The Piano Lesson*, had its world premiere in December 1987 at the Yale Repertory Theatre with a subsequent run in Boston. In 1989 it will reopen at Chicago's Goodman Theatre. Meanwhile, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* continues to be performed at regional theaters across the country.

Wilson is also venturing into new dramatic territory. He wrote the original text or "book" of an upcoming musical about black jazz musician Jelly Roll Morton. Wilson is also at work on his first screenplay—a film treatment of *Fences* that will star James Earl Jones, reprising his original Broadway role, and the popular comedian Eddie Murphy.

Despite these more commercial ventures, Wilson remains most committed to his original delineated literary turf—history. He is already at work on the fifth play in his dramatic cycle, *Two Trains Running*. Set in 1968, *Trains* will continue Wilson's investigation into history, that individual and collective process of discovery that, as he says, "becomes doubly important if someone else has been writing yours for you." His plays maintain a contemporary involvement with the past and punctuate each era with its own particular totems. By mining black American music, which Wilson sees as one of the few traditionally acceptable venues for black American culture, Wilson is able to reveal the cumulative history informing his protagonists: nearly all his characters are in search of their individual songs of identity. Wilson describes Loomis's metaphysical journey in *Joe Turner*,



Wilson's first Broadway production, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, captures the Jazz Age.





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Wilson's spiritual allegory, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, explores bondage and redemption.



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**"I'll never run out of material.  
If I finish this cycle, I'll just start over again.  
You can write forever about what happened  
when blacks came to the cities,  
how their lives changed,  
how it affected generations to come."**

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for example, as a "song in search of itself."

Its musical allusions aside, Wilson's writing is a poetic melding of African and Western imagery. His use of ethnographically specific folklore borders on the mystical and reinforces the distinctively nonlinear narrative style which the playwright ascribes to an "African storytelling mode." While some have been slow to warm to this nontraditional dramatic structure, others have praised it as indigenous to the black oral tradition, a heritage that embraces African as well as Bible Belt oral patterns and serves as Wilson's own palimpsest. "It is writing based on centuries of 'hearing,'" says director Claude Purdy, who staged Wilson's *Fences* in Rochester, New York.

Wilson describes his work as an attempt to confront "the glancing manner in which white America looks at blacks and the way blacks look at themselves." By probing the sociological archetype with sufficient metaphor but without conspicuous didacticism, Wilson has set himself apart from many of the so-called angry young black playwrights, including Ed Bullins and Amiri Baraka, who wrote so prolifically during the late 1960s. "I can only do what I do because the '60s existed," Wilson reasons. "I am building off that original conflict."

Although he maintains that "the one thing that has best served me as a playwright is my background in poetry," Wilson first came to the theater out of a search for a broader forum in which to voice his social concerns; initially he thought about a legal career. But after a boyhood spent on the streets of Pittsburgh—Wilson dropped out of school at age 15—the playwright says, "My sense of justice [became] very different from what the law says. It just happened that my talent lies with words." Purdy confirms Wilson's motives: "August

**August Wilson in Pittsburgh.**



came out of the '60s with a responsible attitude, eager to explore his community's culture and do something for his people."

As a cofounder of Pittsburgh's Black Horizon Theatre, Wilson wrote his early one-acts during the height of the Black Power Movement. It was a way, he says, "to politicize the community and raise consciousness." Today Wilson prefers the label of cultural nationalist.

"An interviewer once asked me if having written these plays I hadn't exhausted the black experience. I said, 'Wait a minute. You've got 40,000 movies and plays about the white experience, and we don't ask if you've exhausted your experience.' I'll never run out of material. If I finish this [play] cycle, I'll just start over again. You can write about that forever, that clash between the urban North and the rural South, what happened when [blacks] came to the cities, how their lives changed and how it affected generations to come."

It is an outspoken assertion from this usually reserved 43-year-old writer now residing in St. Paul, Minnesota. With his soft-spoken affability and almost old-fashioned politeness, Wilson hardly appears the source for the chorus of vibrant voices peopling his plays. Nonetheless, to describe Wilson's deep-country characters—their voices by turns soft and genial or angry and defiant—one comes at last to their author.

"After I turned 20, I spent the next 10 to 15 years hanging out on street corners, following old men around, working odd jobs. There was this place called Pat's Cigar Store in Pittsburgh. It was the same place that Claude McKay had mentioned in his book *Home to Harlem*. When I found out about that, I said, 'This is a part of history,' and I ran down there to where all the old men in the community would congregate."

Although Wilson originally channeled his literary efforts into poetry,

his move to Minnesota in the early 1970s served as a catalyst, permitting those colloquial voices and his own skills as a dramatist to come into their own. "St. Paul was a different environment from Pittsburgh," explains Wilson. "I was no longer hearing those voices [in Pat's Cigar Store] every day."

Initially working as a script writer for the local science museum's children's theater while firing off "five plays in three years" to the O'Neill Theater, Wilson did not conceive of himself as a playwright until he received the first of several writing grants. After submitting his earlier play *Jitney* to Minneapolis's Playwrights Center, Wilson was awarded a Jerome Foundation fellowship in the late 1970s. (He has subsequently received Bush, Rockefeller, McKnight and, most recently, Guggenheim fellowships.) "I walked in and there were 16 playwrights," Wilson remembers about that first grant. "It was the first time I had dinner with other playwrights. It was the first time I began to think of myself as one."

This grant, "two hundred bucks a month for a year," afforded Wilson the opportunity to rework a previously written one-act about a blues recording session into what became the full-length *Ma Rainey*, his first play accepted by the O'Neill and the most naturalistic of his dramas. Set in a Chicago recording studio in 1927, the play is a garrulous and colloquially accurate look at the exploitation of black musicians. Through Wilson's carefully orchestrated verbal riffs, the characters' struggle for identity slowly escalates to a violent conclusion.

In *Ma Rainey*, the struggle is predicated not only upon friction between the white recording executives and the black musicians but also upon subtle conflicts within the black community itself. Ma, the recording star, knows the limits of her commercial success, admitting, "It's just like I been a whore." The elderly pianist, Toledo, is an African nationalist who argues, "We done sold ourselves to the white man in order to be like him." Levee, the headstrong trumpeter, is intent on making it in the white world, on seeing his name in lights. Unable to confront his white oppressors, Levee fatally lashes out at his own peo-

ple. Wilson describes Levee's condition in a rhetorical question: "How can I live this life in a society that refuses to recognize my worth, that refuses to allow me to contribute to its welfare?"

It is a question that Wilson probes again in *Fences*, written partly as a response to criticism of *Ma Rainey*'s bifurcated focus. "*Fences* was me sitting down saying, 'OK, here is a play with a large central character.' " It was also the writer's attempt to create a protagonist who, unlike the impatient and intransigent Levee, had achieved a grudging parity with his times, albeit a smoldering suppression of desire suitable to the political realities of the 1950s. "Unlike Levee, Troy didn't sell his soul to the devil," says Wilson.

A former Negro League baseball player who had been past his prime by the time Jackie Robinson became the first black man in the major leagues, Troy Maxson can be considered Wilson's most overtly didactic character. "I had to write a character who is responsible and likes the idea of family," says the playwright. This sense of responsibility—for one's own destiny as well as one's own family—is pivotal for the playwright, not only in its metaphysical ramifications but in its more pragmatic applications as well. "We have been told so many times how irresponsible we are as black males that I try and present positive images of responsibility," says Wilson. "I started *Fences* with the image of a man standing in his yard with a baby in his arms."

It is this sense of individual accountability that Wilson's other protagonists—Loomis in *Joe Turner* and Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson*—confront in more mystical terms. "In *Ma Rainey* and *Fences*," Wilson explains, "the two roads into white American society traditionally open to blacks, entertainment and sports, fail the characters." As a result, the leading figures in the subsequent plays do not establish their identities relative to the



white world; they rediscover themselves as Africans. "If black folks would recognize themselves as Africans and not be afraid to respond to the world as Africans, then they could make their contribution to the world as Africans," says Wilson.

Set in 1911 in order to get closer to this "African retentiveness," *Joe Turner* is infused with so much non-Western mysticism and folklore—ghosts, myths, chants and spells—that the narrative can be seen as a spiritual allegory. Based partly on the painting "Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket" by the late black artist Romare Bearden, as well as on the legend of the actual slave hunter Joe Turner, the play is rich with historical detail and religious feeling. Loomis's search for his own past after seven years of bondage symbolizes the quest of an entire race. "As a whole, our generation knows very little about our past," explains Wilson. "My parents' generation tried to shield their children from the indignities they'd suffered."

For Loomis, this journey towards self-knowledge includes two apocalyptic moments—baptismal exorcisms that bracket the play's two acts and reverberate with much of the same violence found in *Ma Rainey*. In the first of these cathartic steps, Loomis confronts his vision of "bones walking on top of water," a mythic image of ancestral suffering. In the final scene, Loomis faces both Christianity and African myth, and with a single symbolic act, finds himself purged of his past and a free man. As Loomis states, "I don't need anyone to bleed for me, I can bleed for myself." Says Wilson: "Blacks in America have been wrestling with ghosts of the white man for decades, trying to exorcise them from their lives. Loomis learns that he is responsible for his own salvation and presence in the world."

It is a moment of individual transfiguration that Wilson examines again, and to even stronger effect, in *The Piano Lesson*. Although Wilson is not yet fully satisfied with this latest entry in his historical cycle, the play's inherent dramatic conflict—a brother and sister arguing over their shared legacy, the family piano—and its crisp scenic construction augur well for Wilson's continuing development. The piano itself is Wilson's clearest, most fully realized symbol, one that resounds with African and Western significance while forming the fulcrum of the play's metaphysical debate. "The real issue is the piano, the legacy. How are you going to use it?" says Wilson.

There are two choices, one taken up by Berneice, who wants to preserve the blood-stained piano as a totem to the family's violence-wracked past. Her brother, Boy Willie, howev-

er, is intent on literally capitalizing on the family's history to create a new future; he wants to sell the piano and buy the land their father originally farmed as a slave. "I ain't gonna be no fool about no sentimental value," Boy Willie says. "With that piano I get the land and I can go down and cash in the crop." As Wilson describes his character's position, "I often wonder what the fabric of American society would be like if blacks had stayed in the South and somehow found a way to develop [economically] and lock into that particular area. That's what Boy Willie is articulating. He wants to put his hands to better use."

Willie's desire encapsulates August Wilson's overall intent. "I think it's largely a question of identity. Without knowing your past, you don't know your present—and you certainly can't plot your future," Wilson says. "You go out and discover it for yourself." ♦

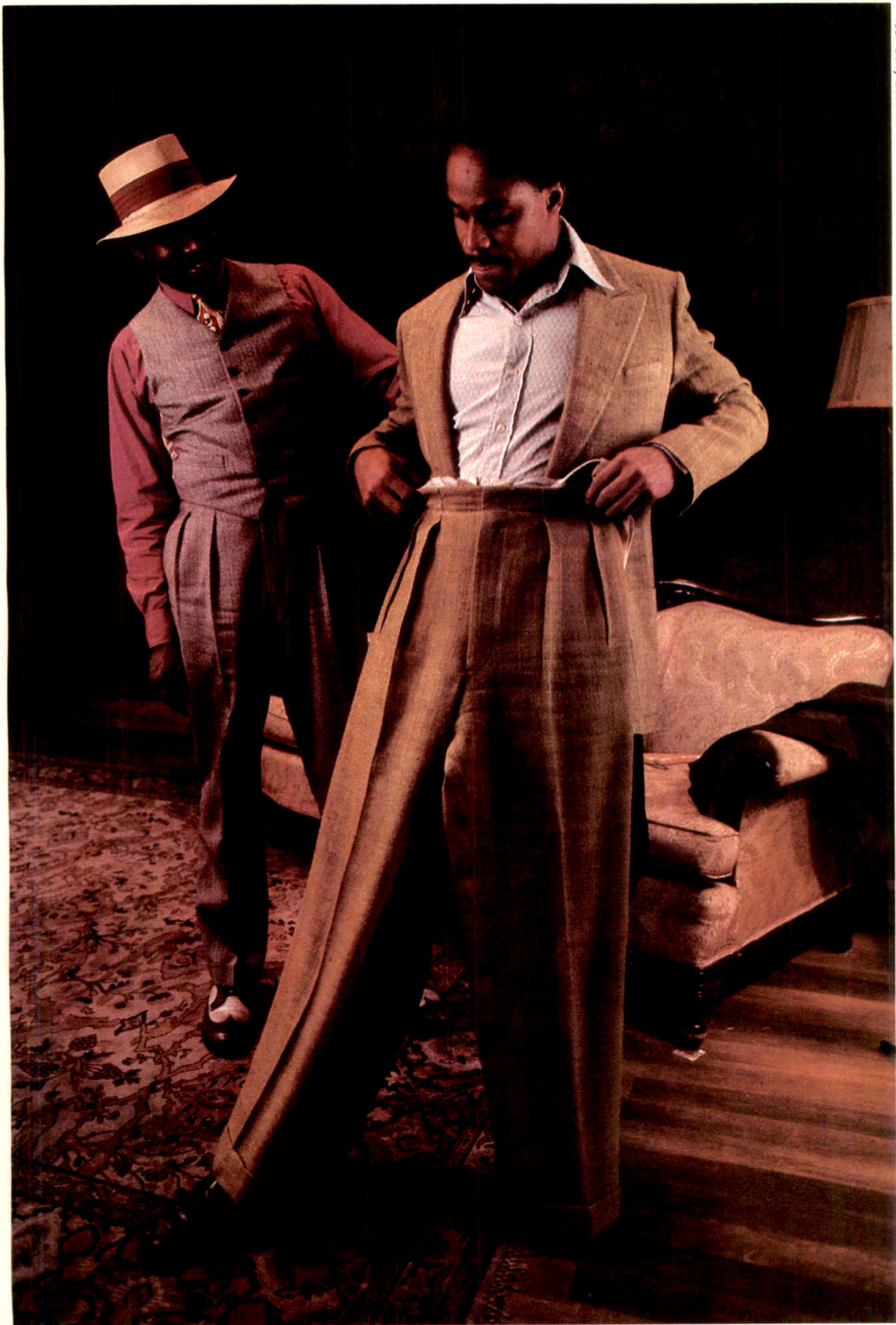
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**A family struggles with its legacy in these two scenes from Wilson's most recent play, *The Piano Lesson*.**



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# Black Consciousness in Perspective

**Countering those themes of Afro-American literature that emphasize racial solidarity, the author argues that middle-class values, assimilationist and raceless, exert a strong pull on American blacks.**

By Shelby Steele

*The themes of much contemporary black fiction and the dramas of August Wilson—themes of individualism and assuming responsibility for one's own life—distinguish black literature today from the writing of the 1960s. But the idea of a purely racial identity—and racial solidarity—continues to influence black thought. In the following article, excerpted from a very personal reflection titled "On Being Black and Middle Class," writer and teacher Shelby Steele argues that his own life has been shaped as much by the pull of his father's traditional middle-class values of work, family, property and education as by his experiences as a black man.*

*Shelby Steele is associate professor of English at San Jose State University in California. He has published fiction, essays and literary criticism and is currently at work on a collection of essays on the subject of race.*

Not long ago a friend of mine, black like myself, said to me that the term *black middle class* was a contradiction in terms. Race, he insisted, blurred class distinctions among blacks. If you were black, you were just black and that was that. When I argued, he let his eyes roll at my naïveté. Then he went on. For us, as black professionals, it was an exercise in self-flattery, a pathetic pretension, to give meaning to such a distinction. Worse, the very idea of class threatened the unity that was vital to the black community as a whole.

For many years I had been on my friend's side of this argument. Much of my conscious thinking on the old conundrum of race and class was shaped during my secondary-school and college years in the race-charged 1960s, when the fact of my race took on an almost religious significance. Progressively, from the mid-1960s on, more and more aspects of my life found their explanation, their justification and their motivation in race. My youthful concerns about career, romance, money, values and even styles of dress became subject to consultation with various oracular sources of racial wisdom. And these ranged from a figure as ennobling as Martin Luther King Jr. to the underworld elegance of dress I found in jazz clubs on the South Side of Chicago. Everywhere there were signals, and in

those days I considered myself so blessed with clarity and direction that I pitied my white classmates who found more embarrassment than guidance in the fact of *their* race. In 1968, inflated by my new power, I took a mischievous delight in calling them culturally disadvantaged.

But now, hearing my friend's comment was like hearing a priest from a church I'd grown disenchanted with. I understood him, but my faith was weak. What had sustained me in the 1960s sounded monotonous and off-the-mark in the '80s. For me, race had lost much of its singular capacity to conjure meaning. And today, when I honestly look at my life and the lives of many other middle-class blacks I know, I can see that race never fully explained our situation in American society. Black though I may be, it is impossible for me to sit in my single-family house with two cars in the driveway and a swing set in the back yard and *not* see the role class has played in my life. And how can my friend, similarly raised and similarly situated, not see it?

## Caught in a Double Bind

What became clear to me is that people like myself, my friend and middle-class blacks generally are caught in a very specific double bind that keeps two equally powerful elements of our identity at odds with each other. The middle-class values by which we were raised—the work ethic, the importance of education,

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the value of property ownership, of respectability, of "getting ahead," of stable family life, of initiative, of self-reliance, etc.—are, in themselves, raceless and even assimilationist. They urge us toward participation in the American mainstream, toward integration, toward a strong identification with the society—and toward the entire constellation of qualities that are implied in the word *individualism*. These values are almost rules for how to prosper in a democratic, free-enterprise society that admires and rewards individual effort. They tell us to work hard for ourselves and our families and to seek our opportunities whenever they appear, inside or outside the confines of whatever ethnic group we may belong to.

But the particular pattern of racial identification that emerged in the 1960s and that still prevails today urges middle-class blacks (and all blacks) in the opposite direction. This pattern asks us to see ourselves as an embattled minority, and it urges an adversarial stance toward the mainstream, an emphasis on ethnic consciousness over individualism. It is organized around an implied separatism.

The opposing thrust of these two parts of our identity results in the double bind of middle-class blacks. There is no forward movement on either plane that does not constitute backward movement on the other. This was the familiar trap I felt myself in while talking with my friend. As I spoke about class, his eyes reminded me that I was betraying race. Clearly, the two indispensable parts of my identity were a threat to one another.

Of course when you think about it, class and race are both similar in some ways and also naturally opposed. They are two forms of collective identity with boundaries that intersect. But whether they clash or peacefully coexist has much to do with how they are defined. Being both black and middle class becomes a double bind when class and race are defined in antagonistic terms, so that one must be repressed to appease the other.

The black middle class has always defined its class identity by means of

positive images gleaned from middle- and upper-class white society, and by means of negative images of lower-class blacks. This habit goes back to the institution of slavery itself, when "house" slaves both mimicked the whites they served and held themselves above the "field" slaves. But in the 1960s the old bourgeois impulse to dissociate from the lower classes (the "we-they" distinction) backfired when racial identity suddenly called for the celebration of this same black lower class. One of the qualities of a double bind is that one feels it more than sees it, and I distinctly remember the tension and strange sense of dishonesty I felt in those days as I moved back and forth between the demands of class and race.

### Imprinting Middle-Class Values

Though my father was born poor, he achieved middle-class standing through much hard work and sacrifice (one of his favorite words) and by identifying fully with solid middle-class values—mainly hard work, family life, property ownership and education for his children (all four of whom have advanced degrees). In his mind these were not so much values as laws of nature. People who embodied them made up the positive images in his class polarity. The negative images came largely from the blacks he had left behind because they were "going nowhere."

My middle-class identity involved a dissociation from images of lower-class black life and a corresponding identification with values and patterns of responsibility that are common to the middle class everywhere. These values sent me a clear message: be both an individual and a responsible citizen, understand that the quality of your life will approximately reflect the quality of effort you put into it, know that individual responsibility is the basis of freedom and that the limitations imposed by fate are no excuse for passivity.

Whether I live up to these values or not, I know that my acceptance of them is the result of lifelong conditioning. I know also that I share this conditioning with middle-class people of all races and that I can no more easily be free of it than I can be free of my race. Whether all this got started

because the black middle class modeled itself on the white middle class is not relevant. For the middle-class black, conditioned by these values, the sense of meaning they provide is as immutable as the color of his skin.

I started the 1960s in secondary school feeling that my class-conditioning was the surest way to overcome racial barriers. My racial identity was pretty much taken for granted. After all, it was obvious to the world that I was black. Yet I ended the 1960s in graduate school a little embarrassed by my class background and with an almost desperate need to be "black." The tables had turned. I knew very clearly (though I struggled to repress it) that my aspirations and my sense of how to operate in the world came from my class background, yet "being black" required certain attitudes and stances that made me feel secretly a little duplicitous. The compatibility of class and race I had known in 1960 was gone.

For blacks, the decade between 1960 and 1969 saw racial identification undergo the same sort of transformation that national identity undergoes in times of war. It became more self-conscious, more narrowly focused, more prescribed, less tolerant of opposition. It spawned an implicit party line, which tended to disallow competing forms of identity. Race-as-identity was lifted from the relative slumber it knew in the 1950s and pressed into service in a social and political war.

The form of racial identification that quickly evolved to meet this challenge presented blacks as a racial monolith, a singular people with a common experience of oppression. Differences within the race, no matter how ineradicable, had to be minimized. Class distinctions were one of the first such differences to be sacrificed, since they not only threatened racial unity but also seemed to stand in contradiction to the principle of equality which was the announced goal of the movement for racial pro-



gress. The discomfort I felt in 1969, the vague but relentless sense of duplicity, was the result of a historical necessity that put my race and class at odds, that was asking me to cast aside the distinction of my class and identify with a monolithic view of my race.

### Victim-Focused Black Identity

If the form of this racial identity was the monolith, its substance was victimization. The civil-rights movement and the more radical splinter groups of the late 1960s were all dedicated to ending racial victimization, and the form of black identity that emerged to facilitate this goal made blackness and victimization virtually synonymous: to be black was to be a victim; therefore, not to be a victim was not to be black. Since it was our victimization more than any other variable that identified and unified us, it followed logically that the purest black was the poor black.

In graduate school I was once told by a white professor, "Well, but ...you're not really black. I mean, you're not disadvantaged." In his mind my lack of victim status disqualified me from the race itself. More recently I was complimented by a black student for speaking reasonably correct English, "proper" English as he put it. "But I don't know if I really want to talk like that," he went on. "Why not?" I asked. "Because then I wouldn't be black no more," he replied without a pause.

As a middle-class black I have often felt myself *contriving* to be "black." And I have noticed this same contrivance in others—a certain stretching away from the natural flow of one's life to align oneself with a victim-focused black identity. Our particular needs are out of sync with the form of identity available to meet those needs. Middle-class blacks need to identify racially. It is better to think of ourselves as black and victimized than not black at all, so we contrive (more unconsciously than consciously) to fit ourselves into an identity that denies our class and fails to address the true source of our vulnerability.

For me this once meant spending inordinate amounts of time at black faculty meetings, though these meetings had little to do with my real racial anxieties or my professional life. I was

new to the university, one of two blacks in an English department of over 70, and I felt a little isolated and vulnerable, though I did not admit it to myself. But at these meetings we discussed the problems of black faculty and students within a framework of victimization. The real vulnerability we felt was covered over by all the adversarial drama the victim/victimized polarity inspired, and hence went unseen and unassuaged. And this, I think, explains our rather chronic ineffectiveness as a group. Since victimization was not our primary problem—the university had long ago opened its doors to us—we had to contrive to make it so. What I got at these meetings was ultimately an object lesson in how fruitless struggle can be when it is not grounded in actual need. Through the prism of victimization the university seemed more impenetrable than it actually was, and we more limited in our powers. We fell prey to the victim's myopia, making the university an institution from which we could seek redress but which we could never fully join. And this mind-set often led us to look more for compensations for our supposed victimization than for opportunities we could pursue as individuals.

The discomfort and vulnerability felt by middle-class blacks in the 1960s, it could be argued, were a worthwhile price to pay considering the progress achieved during that time of racial confrontation. But what may have been tolerable then is intolerable now. Though changes in American society have made it an anachronism, the monolithic form of racial identification that came out of the 1960s is still very much with us. It may be more loosely held, and its power to punish heretics has probably diminished, but it continues to catch middle-class blacks in a double bind, thus impeding not only their own advancement but even, I would contend, that of blacks as a group.

The victim-focused black identity encourages the individual to feel that his advancement depends almost entirely on that of the group. Thus he loses sight not only of his own possibilities but of the inextricable connection between individual effort and individual advancement. This is a profound encumbrance today, when

there is more opportunity for blacks than ever before, for it reimposes limitations that can have the same oppressive effect as those the society has only recently begun to remove.

It was the emphasis on mass action in the 1960s that made the victim-focused black identity a necessity. But in the 1980s and beyond, when racial advancement will come only through a multitude of individual advancements, this form of identity inadvertently adds itself to the forces that hold us back. Hard work, education, individual initiative, stable family life, property ownership—these have always been the means by which ethnic groups have moved ahead in America. Regardless of past or present victimization, these "laws" of advancement apply absolutely to black Americans also. There is no getting around this. What we need is a form of racial identity that energizes the individual by putting him in touch with both his possibilities and his responsibilities.

It has always annoyed me to hear from the mouths of certain arbiters of blackness that middle-class blacks should "reach back" and pull up those blacks less fortunate than they—as though middle-class status were an unearned and essentially passive condition in which one needed a large measure of noblesse oblige to occupy one's time. My own image is of reaching back from a moving train to lift on board those who have no tickets. A noble enough sentiment—but might it not be wiser to show them the entire structure of principles, effort and sacrifice that puts one in a position to buy a ticket any time one likes? This, I think, is something members of the black middle class can realistically offer to other blacks. Their example is not only a testament to possibility but also a lesson in method. But they cannot lead by example until they are released from a black identity that regards that example as suspect, that sees them as "marginally" black. ♦



# BETWEEN LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE

By Peter Steinfels

Most Americans remain politically and culturally independent of the Left and the Right.

*Conventional wisdom commonly divides the American political scene into two camps: conservative and liberal, convenient labels that suggest not only electoral choices but also values on a whole range of economic, social, moral and foreign-policy issues. Conservatives are traditionalists, associated with concern for the family and solving problems by sheer will; they are likely to identify with the familiar and think in terms of "us." Liberals, by contrast, are modernizers who emphasize compassion, seek solutions through the intellect and are willing to empathize with outsiders or "them." But, as journalist Peter Steinfels writing for the liberal journal Dissent explains, the vast majority of Americans are neutral, "civilians" in the culture wars. "Torn by loyalties to both sides," most people shift allegiances as the context requires, and they shy away from facile or consistent world views, whether these be propounded by the Left or Right. Steinfels concludes that "Americans have always been far more complicated, far more unpredictable," too aware of the complexities of life, to be lured into one camp or the other.*

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For almost a quarter century Americans have been engaged in a kind of civil war, divided into two camps defined by fundamentally different moral-cultural perceptions. That idea, which would have been a surprise to 19th-century analysts of American society like Tocqueville or Bryce, has haunted U.S. political activity and analysis since the 1960s. Sociologist and left-wing activist Todd Gitlin has described this "cultural civil war" as one "between the traditionalists and modernizers": it has gone on for no less than a century but "flared up with a vengeance in the 1960s" and raised issues that "were never resolved or assimilated." Sociologist Peter Berger is representative of the neoconservative Right when he writes of nothing less than a *Kulturkampf* in which a whole range of social, moral and religious issues pit the traditional middle class, now spearheaded by "business," against the new "knowledge class." The Right, too, dates the outbreak of present hostilities from the 1960s. It is the decade, after all, that gave us such notions as "counterculture," "Middle America," "silent majority."

The skirmishes in this civil war continue. The vigor of the contending forces is impressive, but it may disguise several realities of American political life.

First, most Americans are "civilians" in the great cultural civil war. They are caught between the lines,



and they are torn by loyalties to both sides. Poll takers have been noting this fact all along. In a recent Gallup poll, for example, 87 percent of those surveyed declared they have "old-fashioned values about family and marriage," but more than two-thirds rejected the idea that "women should return to their traditional role." Seven out of 10 said that government should "take care of people who can't take care of themselves," but almost as many agreed that "when something is run by the government, it is usually inefficient and wasteful." The public overwhelmingly thinks big business makes too much money and has too much power—but also thinks government regulation does more harm than good. Such statistics only echo and distill the "contradictions" that can be heard in luncheonettes, bars, school meetings, anywhere Americans have not been schooled in the principles of ideological consistency.

Second, despite the predictable clashes, there is something of a lull in the struggle. Perhaps everyone is feeling a bit chastened. The concentration of poverty among families headed by single mothers has given new urgency to certain feminist demands, but questions about family breakdown are also being reopened, especially by minority leaders, in a way that was not thinkable 20 years ago. The risk that AIDS and teenage pregnancies could be manipulated to reinforce right-wing fear-mongering has not kept these two threats from inducing a new sobriety among people who once rejected "Victorian" mores. A recent well-publicized court battle in which a surrogate mother sought custody of a child she had agreed to

bear for another family reminded everyone of how ill-prepared we are for a whole clutch of problems posed by the impingement of technology and commerce on human reproduction.

The censorious Right has had to beat at least a tactical retreat, the sex scandals of television evangelists having fulfilled the fondest hopes of everyone who believes that skeptics like Sinclair Lewis, H.L. Mencken and Clarence Darrow said the last word on American fundamentalism. Similarly, the sex scandal involving presidential candidate Gary Hart proved that neoliberalism could be reduced to petulance and people running up and down the back stairs. Finally, the gyrations of the stock market have wonderfully concentrated everyone's mind. For the moment, moral righteousness has been dampened a bit all around.

Warfare between the two camps is also eased by the availability of a group that everyone can criticize. Admittedly, the censure is not very severe, for the subordinate status of the group under fire is indicated by the diminutive, petlike ring of its popular name—*yuppies* or materialistic young urban professionals. Yuppies, after all, are the children who made good. (One popular "family" columnist has warned parents to be careful, "the yuppie you scorn may be your own.") But precisely for that reason, the antiyuppie reproaches, which range from genial derision to outright condemnation, disclose much about the moral stances of Left and Right—and their limits.

The Left, for example, reproaches yuppies for their lack of social consciousness, their readiness to translate their individual, family or educa-

tional advantages into strictly personal success, their unembarrassed rush to the good life conceived as a low-risk, tasteful hedonism. In contrast to the generation of the 1960s, yuppies opted for fine-tuning their private worlds—which sometimes seem to extend scarcely further than their skin—rather than attempting to alter the public world.

What most of the varieties of conservatism hold against yuppies, on the other hand, is their lack of "family values." It is not the ambition, the material success, the rejection of public responsibility that are lamented but the fact that yuppie energies are not contained within the framework of stability thought to be necessary for family life: sexual fidelity, delayed gratification, deference toward the generation in place, respect for religious beliefs and other traditional standards.

Yuppies are something of an embarrassment to both sides in the national *Kulturkampf*. Key values in both the liberal and conservative constellations can evidently be joined to produce a hybrid no one is eager to claim. Education, intelligence, a critical view toward traditional pieties have not produced the socially committed activists that liberals might have anticipated. Entrepreneurial energy and independence and eager acceptance of the economic system have not produced the solid, or even patriotic, Americans the conservatives desired. A recent survey of Notre Dame University alumni—a Middle American bellwether, to be sure—reveals that over the last 10 years, Notre Dame graduates have become politically more conservative and religiously



*Yuppies are something of an embarrassment to both sides in the Kulturkampf. Key values of both conservatives and liberals can evidently be joined to produce a hybrid no one is eager to claim.*

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more liberal. When some of the reports from the school on these developments seemed to carry an upbeat, approving tone, a friend in the university's administration commented sourly: "So what? It just shows that the alumni don't want the church proposing limits on what they do with their sex lives or the government proposing limits on what they do with their money. Nothing remarkable there. It used to be called selfishness."

I suppose we should enjoy the truce while we can. It won't, of course, be permanent. The *Kulturkampf* will undoubtedly boil up again and again, and maybe there is nothing to be done except slog it out, knee-deep in exaggerations and caricature. It may be, however, that the momentary state of relative calm (or confusion) provides a chance to take a fresh look at the values in conflict and rethink political approaches to them.

Not that there haven't been any number of efforts to think across the battle lines of the cultural war. Writers on the Left as well as an occasional conservative like political analyst Kevin Phillips have outlined "populist" programs meant either to bridge or to skirt the gap between Left and Right. Liberal activists have debated the merits of stressing their own version of "family" politics. The Catholic bishops, in particular Chicago's Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, have argued for a "consistent ethic of life," melding their concerns about nuclear weapons and abortion with opposition to capital punishment and support for the poor and unemployed. None of these proposals can claim much success. My own effort, moreover, is not a program but (at best) an insight. It is premised on the necessity

of understanding the conservative impulses of a great many Americans who are not necessarily enlisted in the conservative camp.

Emblazoned on the conservative banner is the aforementioned phrase *family values*; on the liberal-left banner, *compassion*. Strange devices! They are scarcely opposites. But in fact they point in different directions. The term *family values*—shorthand for a conglomeration of issues relating to sex, socialization of children, and religion—points toward the world of existing group relationships of people already tied to one another by kinship, religious fellowship or neighborhood proximity. It is the world of "us." In principle, *compassion* is no less relevant to this world than to any other, but that's not what liberal editorialists mean when they invoke the term. They're not talking about compassion for spouse or siblings but fellow feeling for the stranger, the excluded, the neglected. They're talking about a capacity to reach beyond the "us" to the "them." "Family values" point inward; compassion, outward.

**B**ut there is more involved here than a difference in the direction of concern. Consider what the two camps have written on the reverse of their banners, the accusations they most readily fling against one another. The conservative curse word is unmistakable: permissiveness. The liberal counterpart is a little less clear: narrow-mindedness, mean-spiritedness, bias, greed, chauvinism, prejudice—pick one or two.

Again it is difficult at first glance to find any symmetry in these mutual recriminations. It is nothing so neat as a

Right that accuses the Left of trying to change society too rapidly and a Left that accuses the Right of preventing rapid change. Everyone between the Atlantic and the Pacific favors change, it seems, and rapid change too; but in regard to different things. Everyone favors preserving fundamental values; but disagrees as to what they are.

**T**here is, however, one line of symmetry in the national *Kulturkampf* that I find full of political implications. It has not gone undetected but neither has it been underlined. My observation is simply this, that the conservative-liberal opposition lines up rather well with the traditional division of the human personality into will and intellect.

The liberal-left affinity for the intellect flows naturally from the Enlightenment headwaters. Break humanity free from the fetters of superstition, cultivate true science instead, and liberation will follow. The liberal notion of compassion stands squarely in this tradition. It is the antidote of prejudice or of class or racial narrowness; it is a feeling that springs up naturally once understanding breaks through the false barrier of ignorance and error—and reveals a common humanity.

By contrast, it seems increasingly apparent that what the term *family values* means—and also *basics*, as in "back to basics"—has less to do with any particular content than with a general concern for discipline. Discipline, in turn, implies the strengthening of the will and the existence of practices that reinforce the will when it is weak. Virtue and achievement do not spring so much from understand-



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*Emblazoned on the conservative banner is the phrase 'family values'; on the liberal-left banner, 'compassion.' They are scarcely opposites. But family values point inward; compassion, outward.*

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ing as from exercise, testing, repetition. Virtue, indeed, is some habitual excellence. What haunts the conservative camp about liberal "permissiveness," or at least makes the conservative message carry beyond the ranks of ideological or religious true believers, is not simply the rejection of this or that traditional social norm but the suspicion that liberals discount the struggle of will or the need for reinforcing institutions involved in the maintenance of any social norm.

Consider the problem from another angle. Critics of popular conservatism have an easy time demonstrating the inconsistencies in its various elements. On the one hand paeans to the free market and individual enterprise. On the other hand an insistence on social conformity and an intolerance of intellectual heresy or personal eccentricity. The contradictions are obvious. Nonetheless, there is a connection between the back-to-basics movement in the schools, "getting tough" with crime on the streets, letting the market take its course in the economy and a ready resort to military power overseas. All involve rather simple, immediate and direct schemes of incentives. All assume a human psychology—whether in pupils, criminals, economic actors or foreign adversaries—that responds quite straightforwardly to rewards and punishments.

The human psychology assumed by liberals and the Left is considerably more complicated. In all its different forms it posits any number of intervening factors that can deform or even reverse what would otherwise be a clear-cut relationship between incentives and behavior. Penalties may

crack the self-esteem of a novice. Military threats may only stiffen the resolve of an adversary. Rewards may relax the industriousness of a producer.

Is it true, then, that proponents of liberal remedies are inevitably saddled with a complexity that puts them at a rhetorical disadvantage when competing with conservative simplicities? In part, yes. Yet my own guess is that most people know, from their own experience, that the liberal "complex" psychology comes closer to reality. They know that their own children, their spouses and relatives, their neighbors and fellow workers, respond to external pressures in far more convoluted and apparently contradictory ways than the neat reward-punishment schemes would allow. It is not uncommon to hear parents, far removed socioeconomically from the classes where liberal psychology is known to flourish, speak about their children in terms that reveal a full awareness of the complex workings of achievement, discouragement, satisfaction, fear and so on that are part of schooling. Sometimes they will speak in the language of pop psychology—but often in nothing but the language of untutored observation and common sense.

Why then are so many such citizens easily enlisted behind catchphrases like "Spare the rod..." and "There's only one thing these people" (minority teenagers, welfare recipients, labor unions) "understand, and that's force" (a spell in jail, a good boot in the pants, a cut in pay)? Sheer frustration with recalcitrant reality is certainly a good part of the explanation. But again and again

we see that the citizenry is not willing to support the hard Right's across-the-board "get tough" measures, whether against the poor at home or enemies abroad. A good part of the public admits the cogency of liberal ifs, buts and maybes, even while distrusting liberal "permissiveness."

Class differences do become a factor at this point. Those conservatives who have tried to make *knowledge class* a term of derision, respectable social-science jargon for "pointy-headed intellectuals," have conveniently ignored the economic interests that in reality fracture this "class" defined by education and function in a high-tech society. Nonetheless, it is true that the liberal affinity for social remedies that look to intellect, rather than will, naturally suits those for whom intellect is bread-and-butter and for whom personal satisfaction and intellectual challenge constitute a greater source of motivation. Much of the population finds itself in a quite different daily reality. Though they may chafe enough to remain not quite convinced of the conservative psychological model, relatively crude incentives are in fact the acknowledged determinants of their workaday lives. Sheer will is indeed essential to making it through one's obligatory tasks. And when sheer will is found wanting, one appreciates the social practices that provide reinforcement.

A politics totally dominated by these somewhat bleak facts might do little more than replicate them. To go further: a politics that is nothing but will is ultimately a fascism, as the phrase *triumph of the will* reminds us. But a politics that does not accord a sufficient regard for this dimension of human experience is sure to be dis-



trusted. A lot of Americans catching their breath at the end of the day distrust liberalism because they do not think liberalism appreciates whatever it was that got them through that day's work. They find an echo of their own world view in such otherwise anodyne messages as "stand tall," "stay the course" or "just say no."

**I**t's a tough world out there. That's the refrain of Bill Gapolinsky, a young college-educated voter of working-class background whose reaction to the Reagan-Mondale presidential contest in 1984 is profiled, along with the reactions of his family and friends, in Jonathan Schell's *History in Sherman Park*. Bill votes for Reagan. It's a step Bill doesn't feel enthusiastic about, but it's the realistic self-interested choice in a dog-eat-dog economy. Bill feels that Reagan, like himself, can make the realistic, even when unpalatable, choices in a tough world.

It's also a tough world *in* there. The contrast between intellect and will is often part not of a dualist but a tripartite division of personality that adds *emotions* or some corresponding concept. But differing views of the emotions correspond to different attitudes toward intellect and will. If our emotions tend to be naturally positive and harmonious, intellect can more successfully steer them. If, on the other hand, we experience our emotions as unruly and potentially destructive, at least one plausible response is to emphasize the importance of will in keeping them in check or even directing them to constructive ends. This brings us back to a classic description of conservatism as envisioning human nature as weak and corrupt, a de-

scription always hard to reconcile with the relentless and absolutely obligatory optimism of the American Right. The connecting thread is emphasis on will, whether one sees it as barely capable of containing our natural savagery or as actually propelling us far beyond our undisciplined and unmotivated condition into some higher orbit. The underlying truth, which many Americans suspect will not be altered by even the most rational of social arrangements, was expressed by St. Paul: "For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do."

**I**f liberal political strategists were to find something that rang true in these reflections, what would they likely do about it? The prospect is not exactly inspiring. "How do we get a little respect for *will* into a politician's performance?" Change the cadence of his speech, the leading phrases of his stump oration? Pick an issue on which he can demonstrate "toughness"? Of course, the attitudes of politicians must ultimately be communicated in speech and gesture, program and personal qualities. It would be nice to think that such visible evidence corresponded to some inner conviction, some genuine sense of what a good part of the electorate has felt missing from liberalism.

But in fact a politician can do relatively little to change this kind of perception, at least in the short run. Recently, the Democratic party has concentrated on economic issues and dealt lightly with the moral-cultural questions that have divided the nation since the 1960s. That course is sound. Most moral-cultural questions, after all, can be only

marginally affected by the White House and Congress.

Nonetheless, not all the moral-cultural issues can, or should, remain parked on the sidelines; and even the economic issues, let alone the foreign-policy ones, pose the problems of motivation, determination, discipline, exercise of will that so many Americans see as the conservative strong suit, as well as the problems of foresight, negotiation, institutional reform, intelligent planning and (above all) inclusion of outsiders that have been the strength of liberalism. Whether liberals manage to overcome popular doubts on this score may depend less on their own words and actions than on those of dozens of organizations, journals, personalities, even professions that together establish the public image of the liberal "movement."

In sum, Americans have always been far more complicated, far more unpredictable, far more ornery than the various "majorities" that polemicists have celebrated. And that is why most of America is not enlisted in the *Kulturkampf*. They are civilians trying not to be caught in the crossfire. They have some good words and some bad words to say for the combatants. They would much prefer a settlement, and they will lend support to whichever camp does the least damage and whichever camp really seems to understand their recalcitrant civilian existence.





# TOWARD A NEW ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC

By Frederick Turner

'Arcadia' has always been a place where human beings cooperate with nature to produce a richness of ecological variety that would not otherwise exist.

*Two opposite viewpoints characterize our traditional relationship with the world around us. At one extreme is the notion that nature exists to be used by people, to serve humanity and support civilization. At the other extreme are the preservationists who feel that nature is threatened by humanity, and thus see a need to fence it off in protected wilderness areas as far from the influence of man as possible. Professor Frederick Turner stakes out a middle ground—that of the restorationists or champions of a new environmental ethic of man-made nature. In restoring the prairies of the American Midwest, rain forests in the West Indies and dry forests in Central America, this growing movement views man as the custodian of life on Earth. For Turner, restorationists point toward both the past and the future. They recall the classical Arcadian tradition, and through their careful nurturing they ensure the survival of the only known forms of life in the universe.*

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At first it looks like a big, untidy field—tall grass infested with weeds. But then, looking a little longer and a little more carefully, my mind reorders it. There is an unfamiliar, breathtaking, pale yellowish jade freshness in the green, and a preciseness and laciness in the texture that remind me of wildflowers, the ones I've seen along rocky seacoasts or in alpine meadows. These grasses are at home where they are: the towering bluestem and Indian grass in the damper hollows; the twisted awns of the drier stipa; the feathery offset florets of the side oats grama; the brilliant emerald clumps of hair-leaved dropseed. Then there are the broad-leaved plants. Some are giants: the compass plant, with its leathery hand-like leaves; the blanched ultraviolet flowers of the downy phlox; the black-eyed susan, the hoary puccoon and the coneflower; and below, the cold green shields of the prairie dock, the exquisite Turk's-cap lily, the lead-plant thought by early miners to indicate the presence of ore, and purple-and-white prairie clovers; and look—a mottled white-violet-chocolate prairie orchid. Walking on the drier slopes that heave up sunlit into a sky darkening toward a squall, I can see wild roses, sage, horsetails. And there are seedlings from the nearby grove

of savanna oaks that will, if a prairie fire does not kill them, transform these grassy hills (after a few decades) into a shadowy forest.

This is a prairie, then. But again, things are not always as they seem. This is Greene Prairie, planted 40 years ago by the ecological restorationist Henry Greene on 16 hectares of degraded Wisconsin farmland. It is part of the University of Wisconsin's arboretum, which all told has more than 40 hectares of thriving prairie. Almost every prairie plant here is descended from seeds or whole specimens found in old cemeteries, along railroad rights-of-way or on other unfarmed scraps of land in southern Wisconsin. Greene Prairie was one of the first projects of its kind in the country, but now many such restorations are under way.

How does one plant a prairie? First the existing vegetation—in Wisconsin, mostly European grasses or weeds—must be plowed under or burnt off. The height of the water table is considered. Sweating gangs of young volunteers in dungarees harvest the wild seeds or dig up clumps of virgin sod. A prairie contains over 200 species of plants alone, not counting the bacteria, the mycorrhizal fungi in

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Photographs by Larry Kanfer





*Spring comes to the prairies of the American Midwest.*



the rootweb, the insects, animals and birds. The land is planted; then the real hard work, the weeding, begins. The volunteers must be drilled meticulously on the differences between native and alien species, a process that engenders an extraordinary familiarity with the land. Then, after a few seasons of backbreaking work, the prairie is established, and it begins to police and nourish itself.

Much has been written about the marvelous interdependence of species in the wild; the most recent thinking treats ecological systems such as prairies as if they were indeed single entities, with different organs for different functions. The Gaia Hypothesis, named after the Greek goddess of the Earth and advanced by the visionary British ecologist James Lovelock, proposes that the entire planet is itself such an organism—a living being in the wastes of space. In the prairie, the fine network of mycorrhizal fungi that flourishes below the soil surface acts as a primitive nervous system, linking the plants and regulating the flow of nutrients. The actual soil of a healthy prairie is paradoxically very poor, because almost all the nutrients are in circulation in the living biomass—the birds and bees, plants and trees. Creating the prairie, the volunteers and the ecologist who led them created nature—man-made nature.

In another essay I once called for the cultivation of a new American garden—a fresh kind of ecological thinking that would bridge the deep and damaging gap in the American imagination between nature and humanity, the protected wilderness area and the exploited landscape. I came to the arboretum at the University of Wisconsin in search of that garden, and I believe that I found it—or at least one of the core elements of it—in the work of the ecological restorationists. Nor are the restorationists cultivating just in Wisconsin. Wetlands are being restored around the country, and in California, redwood forests. There is the *Bosques Colón* (Forests of Columbus) project in the West Indies, and the visionary tropical dry-forest

restoration project in Costa Rica. It seems to me we have here the elements of a new kind of environmental ethic, one which accepts human participation in nature as essential for us and for the world, and which actively seeks out ways in which that participation can be deepened and extended. It could be argued that the lovely complex tissue of the biosphere, threatened as it is, needs our best talents if it is to survive.

### IN SEARCH OF ARCADIA

If the restored prairie is one prototype of the American garden, it should also be understood as the culmination of a long tradition, the Arcadian tradition. What is Arcadia? One may find it in the paintings of Giorgione, Bellini, Titian; of Lorrain, Poussin, Chardin. In the Western landscape-gardening tradition it consists of a set of ideas and tastes handed down to us, beginning with the biblical gardens of Egypt and Babylon; then on to the Greek gardens celebrated by Homer in his mythical Phaiakia; to the Roman gardens of volcanic Sicily, Naples and the Alban hills; and thence to the gardens of northern Europe—Pope's Twickenham garden, Stourhead, Monet's Clos Normand at Giverny; and then across the Atlantic to the painted landscapes of the Hudson River school, the literary ones of Thoreau and the real ones of park designer Frederick Law Olmsted. It took the bitter check of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s to bring about the last, severest and most demanding notion of the Arcadian ideal. That notion came to conservationist Aldo Leopold, the author of *A Sand County Almanac*, one of the founders of the University of Wisconsin arboretum, and the father of its restored prairie.

Arcadia, if we may speak broadly, is a place where human beings cooperate with nature to produce a richness of ecological variety that would not otherwise exist. Arcadia undergoes continuous but mild change. It is adaptable to all sorts of minor ecological alteration; nevertheless, it works to conserve, to protect and preserve what is needed and what is good—it maintains itself. Perhaps it is a country of the mind only, but we can see

traces of it in the hills of Tuscany, the hedgerow and beech landscape of the Cotswolds, the savannas of Africa and on the prairies of the Midwest. We are drawn to such places, I think, because they remind us, way down in our genes, of the savannas where we achieved our definitive evolution—where human beings became human beings.

But it could be that our very instinct for Arcadia misleads us, fools us into thinking we can recreate the place of our origins; this explains why we might accept a "reproduction" for true nature itself. In my admiration of the restored prairie, am I not like a child gazing through the glass of a museum showcase? Is not the restored prairie little better than a dusty little diorama, with its perpetually brilliant sky lit dimly by the fluorescents, its claustrophobic *trompe l'oeil* perspective, its taxidermized specimens frozen forever in some "natural" act of forage or nest building?

The preservationists of the old fire-and-brimstone school would say just this. For them the discipline of ecology is essentially elegiac, essentially a eulogy to what we humans have destroyed; their science is a postmortem, their myth is of a primal crime by which we are all tainted: the murder of nature. We cannot expiate, let alone compensate for this crime; the best we can do is acknowledge it publicly by setting aside whatever relatively untouched places remain and keeping human beings out of them. For such perfectionists the study of nature is essentially passive and classificatory; action and experiment would be unwarranted. A real diorama might not disturb their fundamental sense of rightness so much as would a restored prairie. A diorama, after all, does depict nature as a corpse—*nature morte*, as the French call a still life.

One can encounter the dismal grandeur of this position, its *schadenfreude*, in many sectors of art and learning. There are political purists



who reject reform as a palliative that will only delay the cleansing fires of the revolution, classicists who see only cultural decline since Homer. It is possible to sympathize with such purists; they often serve as a conscience to humankind. But human beings are just as often ill-served by them—people are not at their best when motivated by guilt or alarm. If not actually paralyzed, they act mulishly, dutifully, without the joy and playfulness that liberate the imagination and start the flow of creative thought.

### NATURE'S COPYING PROCESS

Still we cannot escape the awkward question: is the restored prairie a fake? I have heard it said by one skeptic that to have a restored coastline instead of a "natural" one is as if a museum's Vermeer were removed and secretly replaced by a perfect replica. One is ultimately as shortchanged by the copy of nature as one would be by the copy of the work of art. A large part of the value of nature, as with a Vermeer, is that it is the original; that is, its value depends on its origins.

A plausible and widely held idea, or *ideal*. Behind it, perhaps, we can glimpse the notion, fundamentally theological, that the world is a creation, and inferior to its creator. And underlying this notion there is, perhaps, that basic Indo-European habit of thought—a *human* habit of thought—that derives the nature of the child from the nature of the parent, and thus insists on the inferiority and subordination of child to parent. The very word *nature* is derived from an ancient Indo-European root meaning "birth."

But is not the true role of the parent to educate the child to the point where it becomes independent of its origins and capable of creation beyond its parents' dreams? The American Revolution was a declaration of such independence from the motherland. And though there is one wisdom that says that we know a thing by its origins, there is another that says "by their fruits ye shall know them"—that is, we derive the identity of something not from what produced it but from *what it produces*. The kingdom of heaven may be more like a mustard seed, like a leaven or ferment, than like an achieved perfection; more in poten-

tial than in exhaustion of possibility. The branching tree of evolution brings about wonderfully new forms of life, unpredictable from their origins, or "predictable" only after they have actually appeared.

Perhaps we should compare a living landscape not with a Vermeer, but with a sonnet, which, far from losing beauty and meaning when copied, derives its very life from being printed and reprinted. A landscape is not at all like a Vermeer, if by that we mean it is the same landscape year to year as a Vermeer is the same painting year by year. (And is a Vermeer forever the same?) A prairie recopies, reprints itself every spring, using seeds and shoots that are the books wherein are inscribed the instructions of the DNA code. I would say that a prairie is like the renewing vision of the world that Vermeer began in our culture, that tradition of the revelatory power of light that is reborn in us every time we see a girl in a room lit by a tall window.

In reproducing a prairie, then, the ecological restorationists do but take a leaf out of nature's book. Nature itself copies; it is an uncopied prairie, if such could exist, that would be unnatural. When the retreat of icecaps, the silting up of lakebeds or devastation by volcanic ash lays bare a new environment suitable for prairie, the prairie species are seeded by natural vectors—wind, birds, insects—and copy themselves onto the empty page. Is not *Homo sapiens* in this case just another vector that the prairie biome employs to reproduce itself? A flower uses the esthetic preferences of the bee to attract its pollinator; likewise our esthetic attraction for the prairie causes us to carry its germs to a new environment.

But perhaps even this conception is too conservative. It is the job of the scholar to ensure that the sonnet remains utterly uncorrupted by copying or printers' errors; but nature's copying is not exact. Though the copying process is entirely natural—and thus the preservationists' argument against the "fake" is without

substance—nature itself goes beyond copying to innovation, and allows copying "errors" into its sonnets in an attempt to improve them.

Let us be precise about this. Prairie grass can propagate in one of two ways; by cloning itself with runners or rhizomes or by mating and sexual reproduction, using flowers, fruits and seeds. When it sends out a new shoot, every biomolecular precaution is taken that the DNA in the new cells is identical to that in the originals. Redundancies in the code, periodic checks for exact matching in the complementary nucleic strands, and an immune system on the guard against cancerous or virus-induced revisions of the code—all protect the integrity of the copy. But when a plant reproduces itself sexually, the policy is utterly changed. The twin strands of the chromosomes are separated from each other, the naked strands are paired with those of an alien individual, the genes are chopped up and reshuffled, the copies are conflated and thus corrupted.

What is sex for? Why should plants go to the extraordinary expense of complex energy-using reproductive systems—flowers and fruit and the rest—when they could simply use their built-in growth system and bud themselves a clone? It's all for one purpose: variation. To put this more precisely, it is to create true genetic individuals. And the function of individuals is to act as experimental tests of various possibilities in body conformation, chemistry and behavior that fall within the range of variation for the species. If the individual survives to reproduce, then its particular traits are perpetuated in the gene pool of the species. If it reproduces itself more abundantly than its parents, then it has probably found a better fit to the vicissitudes of its environment. In biological terms, the offspring can better represent its species than the parent. What this means is that, at least when dealing with the phenomenon of life and all phenomena derived from it (culture, technological development, religion, history, etc.), we must allow for the possibility that we truly understand something only by knowing its future, its fruits, its consequences.

Even more revolutionary is the im-



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*The time may come  
when we may seed  
ourselves across the solar  
system and beyond. It will  
take wise bees and other  
forces able to provide the  
right environment for  
infant growth in order to  
produce something  
hospitable to human  
beings. But one day the  
long discipline of  
restoration may bear a  
strange and unexpected  
fruit, and an alien sun  
may shine on miles  
of blowing prairie.*

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*Wheat growing on the American prairies.*





plication that the injunction to know things by their fruits and not only their origins might also apply to the inorganic world of physics and chemistry. The physical universe itself should then be characterized as a life-producing universe. "Life-producingness," to follow this logic, is an essential trait of that "species" we call the universe. This is a version of what physicists call the Anthropic Principle, which stipulates that one of the constraints on the initial state of the cosmos was that it should be the kind of cosmos that could bring about through evolution observers of it that could confirm its existence and compel it to actualize itself by being observed. Quantum theory treats reality as a product of both whatever is "out there"—in itself only a probability—and the act of observation or registering that forces the probability to collapse into actuality. Without observers no universe can exist. We are a far cry here from the ideas of the purists, who want us to leave Nature alone and who deplore the corruptions of human reflexivity.

#### **THE IMPORTANCE OF DYING**

But let us press on and see where the argument takes us. Our meditation upon flowers is not yet over; for variation by sexual recombination, which is the function of flowers, is not enough by itself to keep the breed adaptively abreast of its competition. Another element is required, and that is death. If death does not cull out of the species those individuals whose genes are not adapted to the environment, the defective genes themselves will remain to contaminate the more vigorous strains. It may seem paradoxical to describe death—which is after all the opposite of survival—as a tool in the process of evolution, whose mainspring is survival. But this is exactly the magnificently risky policy to which the sexually reproducing organisms have committed themselves. Most sexual organisms even contain a programmed aging system on the cellular or genetic level to ensure that the individual does not outstay its time. Sex and death; the two great forces at work.



Aging, though, is not enough in many cases to clean out the deadwood of genetic failure. Many species rely on their predators to cull the unfit, and if this kind of "death" is no longer available for some reason, the system begins to break down.

But not even predators are enough to keep an ecosystem balanced. The old prairies were dependent on periodic fires to clear the thatch, fertilize the soil and above all to kill the tree saplings that would otherwise quickly cover the ground. The richest mix of species occurs only on burnt prairies. As William R. Jordan, the editor of *Restoration & Management Notes*, once told me, "Remove the fires caused by lightning or set by Indians, and you have to replace them, or the prairie will quietly vanish, not in a roar of machinery, but into the shadows of a forest." Accordingly, the Wisconsin arboretum burns its prairies—every two years at first, but now more irregularly, as nature might. It is said to be an unforgettable sight, with flames leaping up ten meters, and it is gradually taking on the status of a ritual for the professionals and volunteers who set and manage the fires. I myself can remember from my childhood in central Africa the spring burning practiced by the Ndembu tribe, and the air of festival it conveyed; it is associated for me with the smell of grass smoke, harsh native honey beer, the hunters' rites and dances, and the delicious little ground-fruits that we village boys would find among the burnt grass roots. Perhaps one day prairie burning will be one of the great ritual occasions of the Midwest, a sort of festival of Dionysus, the god of inexhaustible life—an occasion for drama, music, poetry and storytelling.

It is remarkable how passionate the true prairie restorationists are on the subject of burning. The discovery of the need to burn, I believe, emancipated the naturalist; burning can even be seen as a sacrificial rite of redemption for our ecological guilt. The patient, careful labor of copying the natural prairie called for the medieval virtues—humility and obedience to nature, poverty and chastity

of the imagination, sensitivity, self-abnegation, self-effacement. Burning showed that nature needed us, needed even those most Promethean and destructive elements of ourselves symbolized by fire.

#### CUSTODIANS OF LIFE

Let us approach ecological restoration—its value, its moral necessity, its *naturalness*—from another angle. In a very different field of endeavor, the search for extraterrestrial intelligence, a shocking conclusion is beginning to suggest itself, catalyzed by the awkward question blurted out a few years ago at a conference of astronomers: "Where is everybody?" Given the sensitivity of our signal-detection instruments, the ease with which radio signals can be propagated to great distances, the huge number of planetary systems within probable range of us and the certainty that any other technological civilization must be employing radio frequencies for communication, the airwaves should be filled with interstellar chatter. Instead, the silence is deafening. There is no sign that *anyone* is out there. And the moment one begins to think about this fact, it appears more and more plausible that we are alone in the universe. For instance, it is now generally accepted that the universe is only about 12-20,000 million years old, but estimates of how long it will remain in existence in such a form as to support life range well over a 100,000,000 million years. In other words, the universe has seen only a tiny fraction of its existence; it is brand-new. Why should we not be the first? There has to be a first.

If we are alone, then we carry a gigantic responsibility. We are the custodians of life in the universe, and the only plausible vector by which life may propagate itself to other worlds and thus escape the risk that some minor cosmic accident—the impact of a stray asteroid or a disturbance of the sun's activity—should snuff out forever the first shoots of life. It is becoming clear that we cannot survive, psychologically or physically, without the rich web of other lives around us. If we leave this planet we must take our biosphere with us.

The great class of the angiosperms—the flowering plants that

appeared in the mid-Cretaceous period about 100 million years ago and came in a mere five million years to dominate the ecology of the planet—owes its very existence to its insect assistants and the new ecological niches they opened up. The simultaneous explosion of land vertebrates, of which we are one, may in turn be due to the richer carbohydrate and protein content of angiosperm seeds and fruits. The work of the bee and the bird in spreading angiosperm pollen and seed across the continents was not merely a conserving activity. Rather, it actively promoted the creation of new habitats and ecologically richer regimes. The ecological restorationists are taking the first step toward being able to reconstitute on some alien soil the elements of an earthly forest or prairie. Their distant successors will be like the bees, serving as the gentle pander and reproductive vector of other species—participant-gardeners of nature.

At present the restorationist bee is more necessary as a preserver than as a colonist; and the restorationist ethic is, as I have pointed out, mostly one of medieval self-effacement. This is as it should be. But the time may come when we, and our sister species of this planet, may seed ourselves across the solar system and beyond, as once the pelagic or sea species colonized the land, and the insects and the birds the air. The task will be enormous, and will be too much for the relatively slow and unreflective processes of genetic adaption. Who will be the next Virgil to write the *Georgics* of this new Arcadia? It will take wise bees, seed vectors of great exactness—forces able to provide the right environment for infant growth until the growth itself has altered those harsh environments into something hospitable to human beings. But one day the long discipline of restoration may bear a strange and unexpected fruit, and an alien sun may shine on miles of blowing prairie. ♦



# REVIEWS

## BIOGRAPHY

### Tending the Flame

WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR., PATRON SAINT OF THE CONSERVATIVES. By John B. Judis. *Simon & Schuster*. 528 pp.

Reviewed by Alan Brinkley

No one can write a truly definitive biography of a man whose career is still far from over. But in telling the story of William F. Buckley Jr.'s successful life, John B. Judis has come remarkably close. Judis has apparently had unrestricted access to Buckley's personal papers, and to Buckley himself. He has produced a thorough, intelligent book that should remain for some time the standard account of an important American life.

Buckley has spent much of his life inviting, indeed demanding, controversy and disagreement; but Judis portrays him with striking fairness and respect. This is in many ways a sympathetic, even affectionate biography. It will undoubtedly surprise many readers that its author is an intellectual of the Left, a senior editor of the socialist newspaper *In These Times*.

But Judis's ability to empathize with his subject is not as inexplicable as it might seem. For the Buckley who emerges from these pages exhibited through much of his life a

political style that had much in common with the committed activists of the Left. Buckley's aim, as he saw it, was not to defend established institutions, but to challenge and discredit them. He delighted in conflict, reveled in invective, called for (though he did not really expect) a revolutionary change in the nation's values. He was, Judis says, "the 'enfant terrible' of the Eastern intelligentsia" who brought to American conservatism "a philosophy of radical dissent rather than accommodation with the status quo."

Ultimately this biography raises two important questions. Why did the privileged, aristocratic son of a wealthy businessman choose a career, and an intellectual outlook, so out of keeping with the norms of his class? And how, having established himself in the 1950s as the scourge of the Establishment, did he reach so comfortably, and apparently so effortlessly, an accommodation with it 20 years later?

In most outward respects, Buckley's youth was indistinguishable from that of other children of wealth and power who grow up to embrace conventional values and established institutions. He was the son of a successful oil speculator; he traveled widely, attended elite preparatory schools in America and England, and then entered Yale. Yet for all that, Buckley grew up with a curious sense of social and cultural isolation.

One reason for this was his father. Will Buckley Sr. was Irish and Cath-

olic, but never did he or his children identify with the Irish-Catholic subculture in America. The Buckleys generally kept to themselves, a large, close-knit family viewing the world outside their estate with skepticism, and at times with distaste. Will taught his children to detest communism and revolution, to reject the moral relativism of mainstream American culture, to embrace the most conservative norms of the Church as a defense against the false claims of modernity. He also taught them to think of themselves as a specially enlightened elite, destined to fight for a moral code and a social order threatened by the weakness and complacency of those in power.

The young Bill Buckley deeply revered his father and absorbed many of his moral and political teachings. His precocious first book, *God and Man at Yale* (1951), created a furor with its demand that the university dismiss any faculty members whose teachings might, even indirectly, foster atheism or socialism.

Frustrated by what he considered the weakness of existing conservative journals, Buckley raised money to found his own political magazine and published the first issue of *National Review* late in 1955. It quickly became the most influential periodical voice of American conservatism. Over time, it provided a start to a number of bright young conservative intellectuals (John Leonard, Gary Wills, George Will and others). It gave to conservative discourse an air of intellectual and literary seriousness that such discourse had largely lacked in the past. In 1963 Buckley expanded his

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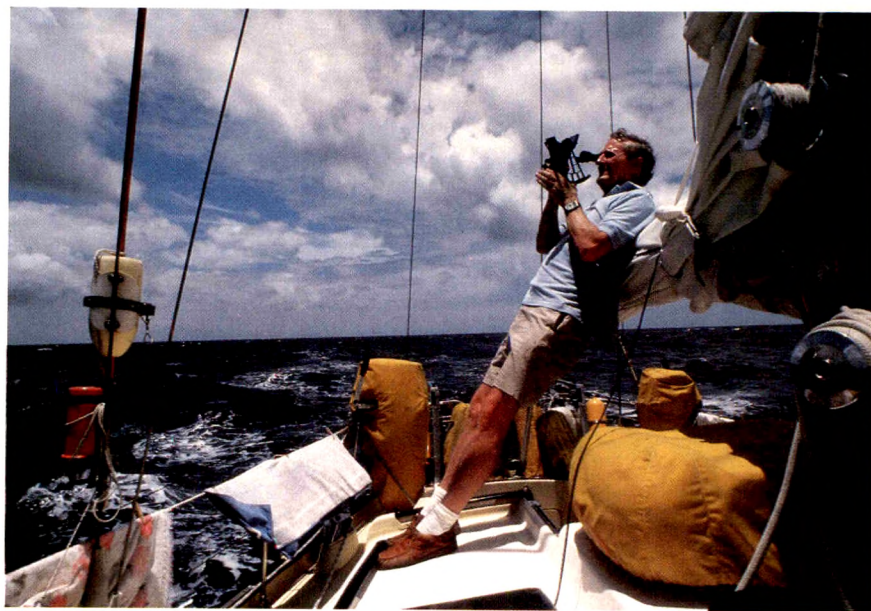
influence with a widely syndicated column, which made his arch, erudite, polysyllabic style familiar to a broad audience for the first time. Three years later he started the television show "Firing Line," which became notable for sharp ideological clashes between Buckley and his hapless, usually overmatched guests.

For more than 20 years Buckley was virtually the embodiment of American conservative thought. There were conservative political figures who had more power, but no one who had more visibility. Yet Buckley's influence was more remarkable for its range than its depth.

Buckley brought to conservatism a new wit, polish, glamour and erudition. But he failed to provide (or even to reveal) a coherent ideological stance that would permit his ideas to move widely through American life. He tried once, in the early 1960s, to write a "big book," a major theoretical work that would make a contribution to political theory. But he could never finish it, or even fully work out the ideas he wished to express. His abandonment of the book, Judis writes, "represented the abandonment of a deeper rationale for his own politics. And insofar as he left contradictions within his own views unresolved and unexamined, it meant the end of his development as a political thinker."

Buckley was better at attacking existing orthodoxies than at offering clear alternatives to them. His most impressive accomplishments were his stinging critiques of the premises of liberalism. The problem with liberals, Buckley argued, was not so much that their beliefs were wrong, but that they lacked any real beliefs at all.

The purpose of the public world, Buckley believed, was not simply to protect individual freedom; it was also to foster a sense of civic virtue and religious morality. A good society must stand for something larger than the selfish interests of its individual members; it must embrace a set of moral and intellectual values and defend them against their enemies. Buckley never clearly defined



William F. Buckley Jr. under sail.

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what those values should be; and that failure defined his limits as a political thinker.

Despite his growing celebrity in the late 1950s and the '60s, Buckley was still, in his own mind at least, a member of what the reactionary theorist Albert Jay Nock (whom Buckley greatly admired) had once defined as the "Remnant": a small intellectual elite whose members guard the real values of civilization against the dangerous clamor of the masses. Members of the "Remnant" did not compromise with the mainstream, did not strive for partial victories and limited accommodations. They tended the flame, preached to the unconvinced, waited for their time to come.

By the late 1960s, however, there were signs that Buckley was growing impatient with this self-imposed marginality. In the early 1970s few traces remained of Buckley's youthful radicalism. He had become less a lonely keeper of the flame of civi-

zation than a pragmatic conservative attempting to influence the course of daily events and keep himself in the public eye.

What had happened? Judis's answer is fairly simple. Buckley was now a celebrity—an author of best-selling spy novels—greeted with warmth and acclaim even by his political opponents. As he became enamored of his own fame and imprisoned by his public persona, the political crusade lost its edge. Responding to charges that he had not, finally, brought to conservatism a new theoretical depth, Buckley answered defensively, "The theoretical depth is *there*, and if I have not myself dug deep the foundations of American conservatism, at least I have advertised their profundity."

For Judis, then, Buckley's immersion in the world of celebrity has been the principal cause of his declining political influence. But it could also be argued that something like the opposite was true: that the political world had begun to turn away from Buckley before he turned away from it. For as conservatism gathered strength in the 1970s and '80s, Buckley—once its



undisputed intellectual leader—began to lose his ascendancy. New conservative writers were now competing for attention: George Will, William Safire, Kevin Phillips. New political journals expressing the views of the increasingly influential neoconservatives were outdistancing *National Review* in their claim to serious attention. There was, beginning in 1981, a conservative administration that in theory served as a vindication of Buckley's long crusade, but that in practice (his personal friendship with the President notwithstanding) carefully and at times humiliatingly excluded him from its councils.

Even more important, perhaps, was the form American conservatism was taking in its hour of triumph. The "Reagan revolution" only occasionally represented the elitist, moralistic conservatism of the "Remnant," which Buckley had for so long defended.

The administration owed much of its success to an essentially populist message—an assault on, not a celebration of, elites—that Buckley (although he never said so) must surely have found difficult to swallow. Perhaps, then, his increasingly frivolous public activities were to a great extent an expression of political disappointment.

Judis makes no effort to disguise his disappointment with these developments. Buckley was at his best, Judis maintains, as a militant outsider. He is now a lesser figure. But this book closes on a note of what Judis evidently considers optimism. "With Reagan gone," Judis argues, "the lights of celebrity will dim, even for Buckley, and conservatives, including Buckley, will once again become the target for liberal barbs. Buckley could find himself in a familiar role—as a member of an embattled minority standing athwart history and yelling stop." ♦

## LABOR

### Automated Workplaces

IN THE AGE OF THE SMART MACHINE. By Shoshana Zuboff. Basic Books. 468 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Howard

"History reveals the power of certain technological innovations to transform the mental life of an era," Shoshana Zuboff states in her imaginatively conceived and closely argued book, *In the Age of the Smart Machine*. For Zuboff, computer-based information technology—the product of recent advances in microelectronics, telecommunications and computer science—is one such innovation, inaugurating "a historical transformation of immense proportions" in the American workplace, on the scale of that experienced during the Industrial Revolution itself.

Zuboff, a professor at Harvard Business School, is certainly not the first to make such a claim. But this book offers a combination of scholarly seriousness and keen attention to the often eloquent voices of those who are living this change. And where most champions of technology view it as an autonomous force to which we can only adapt, and most critics assume that technology's impacts on work are the direct reflection of designers' and managers' intentions, the author captures the unexpected and often contradictory interplay between the computer's diverse possibilities and entrenched social and economic interests.

According to Zuboff, the promise of information technology is nothing less than the transcendence of the industrial division of labor, with its rigid separation of mental from manual work. But, she says, outmoded assumptions about workers'

skills, management authority and corporate purpose serve as a brake on the liberating potential of this technology. She proposes an alternative model of the corporation, replacing the old division of labor with a "new division of learning," in which meeting the demands of work with complex information systems can lead to a more egalitarian and democratic organization of work.

In detailed case studies based on more than five years of research, Zuboff examines the implications of a broad range of computer applications for occupations and organizations across the economy: operators at pulp and paper mills overseeing systems programmed to



The electronic office.

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receive data directly from sensors monitoring the flow of materials; telephone maintenance workers linked by computers to managers in central offices; international bankers designing new information-based products and services for their clients; managers and professionals at a pharmaceutical company sending electronic mail and holding electronic meetings over a company-wide computer network.

The author anchors her cases in a theoretical framework of remark-

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able sophistication, borrowing from research in fields as diverse as social history, management theory, cognitive psychology and sociolinguistics. Among the thinkers whose work one encounters here are German sociologist Norbert Elias on the evolution of etiquette from the Middle Ages to the 18th century, the late French sociologist Michel Foucault on the "disciplinary society," German philosopher Ernst Cassirer on the power of symbols, psychologist Erik Erikson on shame—even the historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith on "ritualistic utterances" among Yakuts in Siberia and Pygmies in Africa.

The result is a work of rare originality and engrossing complexity that defines the choices new technology frames for us, even as it documents how we so often misunderstand these choices.

Throughout human history and for most of the world today, Zuboff says, work has been defined by the active involvement of the human body. The unrelentingly physical nature of work has been the source of sometimes exhausting effort. But at the same time, it has also been the pathway to the acquisition of valuable skills. According to Zuboff, skill in the traditional workplace is "action-centered," acquired through the continuous use and reuse of the body and leading to the kind of informal knowledge captured in the term *know-how*. One mill operator ascertains the moisture content of a roll of pulp by a slap of his hand.

For the author, the paradox of the body as source of both pain (effort) and pleasure (skill) explains workers' traditional ambivalence toward automation. To the degree that technology has eliminated the need for physical effort, it has been welcomed. To the degree it has been used by management to destroy workers' skills, it has been fought.

Managers' experience of traditional automation has been different. The introduction of new office technologies throughout this century has not destroyed executives' skills as it has those of craft workers, but has split the white-collar function itself. The most routine and

easily automated tasks have become the responsibility of a new class of clerical workers—leaving to managers those social tasks too complex to automate.

But what is fundamentally new about information technology, indeed, so new that Zuboff feels compelled to coin a word to describe it: the computer's capacity not only to *automate* by building skill, knowledge and control into software but also to *informate* by collecting and displaying vast quantities of information never available before.

At the paper and pulp mills, computer systems translate material processes into data available on the control-room screen. At the pharmaceutical company, even some informal conversations that used to take place over the telephone or while passing in the hallway now occur over the company-wide computer network—capable of being electronically captured, sent to others or reread at a later date. For Zuboff, this represents a comprehensive "textualization" of work, the creation of a new symbolic medium, an "electronic text" that increasingly mediates between workers and their work, between the body and the task. In the process, work becomes abstract, the manipulation of intangible symbols rather than concrete objects.

The challenge for workers is to translate the raw data of the computer into meaningful information and useful knowledge about production. At the paper and pulp mills, operators must make inferences from the electronic text to the actual physical processes and procedures behind it: are the data truly accurate? What is the cause of a reported irregularity or malfunction? The slap of the hand has given way to symbolic thinking about numbers on a screen—Zuboff's term for this is *intellective skill*.

In such an environment, Zuboff says, "learning is the new form of labor." One paper-mill manager de-

scribes the difference in terms of how workers respond to malfunctions: before computerization, "someone goes out and kicks something"; after computerization, "the operators have a meeting."

For Zuboff, this is an epochal change, on the same order as the creation of the factory system during the 19th century, and her detailed attention to its social and psychological implications is especially illuminating. For workers whose personal and occupational identity is bound up with the pains and pleasures of manual labor, work with information technology can be a source of enormous distress. Despite the increased visibility of the electronic text, they experience the growing irrelevance of their informal know-how as a kind of blindness. One paper-mill operator compares working with information systems to "driving down the highway with your lights out and someone else pushing the accelerator."

But in many respects, the dilemmas information technology poses for managers are even more severe. The more workers learn through their exposure to information technology, says Zuboff, the more the distinctions between workers and managers become blurred. And this strikes at the very heart of traditional concepts of managerial authority. In the hierarchical organization, where managers are paid to think and workers to do, the idea that learning and free inquiry on the part of the entire work force are crucial to performance can be extremely threatening to managers. For this reason, "the informing process sets knowledge and authority on a collision course."

The most fascinating—and most sobering—section of Zuboff's book describes the myriad managerial inhibitions to developing their workers' intellective skill, even when this means not taking full advantage of the technology and subverting the effectiveness of the organization. At her field sites, managers consistently underestimate the skills required by the new technologies; almost without exception, the last item they think about is training. Worse, many use the very



visibility that information technology makes possible not as an occasion for learning about the work, but as a powerful new mechanism to monitor and control workers. The end result is almost a caricature of the traditional industrial division of labor, with authoritarian managers obsessed with technology as an instrument for maintaining power on the one side, and disaffected workers blocked from learning necessary new skills on the other.

The author's alternative is for companies to consciously embrace the teaching potential of the new technology and to systematically encourage workers to learn. To do so, however, requires organizational changes as radical in their implications as the technological changes she describes. "The centerpiece of such a strategy," she writes, "must be a redefinition of the system of authority" dominant in most corporations today. She calls for increased equality, broad access to information and a conception of work as a professional career. ♦

## TELEVISION

### TV News and Public Opinion

NEWS THAT MATTERS: TELEVISION AND AMERICAN OPINION. By Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder. University of Chicago Press. 187 pp.

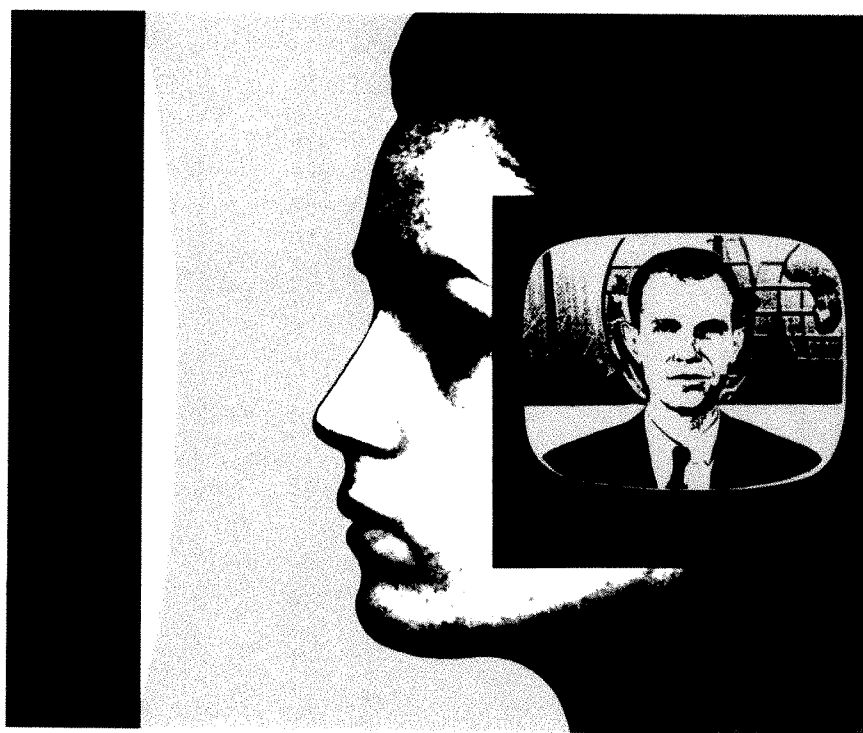
Reviewed by Ralph Braccio

*News That Matters* is the latest book in what has become a chain of research. Like its predecessors, this book illuminates the barely perceptible effects of television.

The question driving much of this research is: does television reflect reality or does reality reflect television? Political scientists

Ralph Braccio is a public-policy consultant in Washington, D.C.

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Cover illustration of *News That Matters*.

Courtesy of the University of Chicago Press

Shanto Iyengar of the State University of New York at Stony Brook and Donald Kinder of the University of Michigan frame this question tightly. They research only the political effects of television news, leaving aside such other well-researched phenomena as television violence and political advertising. But although the authors limit their scope, they search deep. They ask if TV is a primordial power.

Iyengar and Kinder investigate television news with a superb research plan and techniques (yes, this is a scholarly book—appendixes full of beta coefficients and the like). Taking both a broad and microscopic view, they examine opinion data of national scope (a typical political-scientific approach) in conjunction with 14 experiments of their own design that exposed more than 1000 subjects to altered and unaltered video presentations of

news broadcasts (a typical social-psychological approach).

The objective of this research is clear: to determine, unequivocally, whether TV news affects Americans' political opinions. One would expect such clear, sound research objectives and techniques to produce a clear, sound answer. They do not. The fault lies neither with the researchers nor with their experimental design; rather, the problem stems from the cause-and-effect role of television itself, which is so exasperatingly intractable.

The authors are able to demonstrate, somewhat conclusively, that what has become known as the "agenda-setting hypothesis" is true. Agenda-setting states, basically, that viewers parrot television. If over a period of time television dedicates most of its news coverage to a particular subject, for example, international terrorism, then when the public is asked—days later and outside the context of television viewing—what is the major problem facing the country, they will reply: international terrorism. In



short, viewers assign importance to what they see in proportion to the amount of time they see it.

Similarly, the authors find the "priming hypothesis" to be equally robust. If a television news story focuses on the federal budget and deficit spending, and then, immediately afterward, a story focusing on the President is aired, viewers (if asked) will judge the President's performance on the criterion of budget control. Thus, as if being entertained by a warm-up act, the audience links the two stories.

Of course, the authors examine many nuances of the above effects, but by way of conclusion they find an underlying theme: "Americans' views of their society and nation are powerfully shaped by stories that appear on the evening news...our evidence implies an American public with a limited memory for last month's news and a recurrent vulnerability to today's....People do not take into account all that they know...instead, they consider what comes to mind, those bits and pieces of political memory that are accessible....When television news focuses on a problem, the public's priorities are altered, and altered again as television news moves on to something new."

But does the information presented by the authors really matter? After taking surefooted steps to demonstrate the plausibility of priming and agenda-setting, they are left, as are we, nonplused about how much of an effect television news truly has. Can television news, if furtively controlled, change anyone's mind? Or, to put it in the authors' terms, do priming and agenda-setting effects make TV a primordial power? Probably not.

The authors write, "We do not mean to suggest that television's power to set the public agenda and to prime citizens' political choices is unlimited. In fact, our studies suggest clear limits to television's power."

Although the authors' conclusions are rightfully limited by the scope of their research, we as readers can expand them. Whether television news matters may be a three-sided question.

First, does TV have a palpable,

significant effect? The authors show clearly that viewers are influenced by what they see, but they make no demonstration that television can change people's opinion. In fact, they imply that this is exactly where television's effect is limited.

Second, does television's ubiquity compensate for the limits of its effect? If, indeed, 50 million Americans typically watch an evening broadcast, then perhaps the accumulation of limited effects does resound throughout the nation.

Third, the most important, can recognizing the power of agenda-setting and priming help viewers to become more actively critical of television news? Here I think we can say, yes. With a sharp eye and competent memory we can separate the story from the side effect.

This book offers a clear contribution to the chain of studies on the effects of the news media. Well written and precise, it will become a standard reference in the research literature. ♦

## PHOTOGRAPHY

### Instant Art

LEGACY OF LIGHT. Edited by Constance Sullivan. *Alfred A. Knopf*. 255 pp.

Reviewed by Arthur Goldsmith

It's now a little more than 40 years since Edwin Land, who once described himself as a conjurer *manqué*—unfulfilled magician—amazed the photographic community with a revolutionary new technology for making pictures. If it wasn't magic, it seemed close to it: Land's Polaroid film and Model 95 Polaroid Land

*Arthur Goldsmith is editor-at-large of Popular Photography magazine and author of The Camera and Its Images.*

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From *Popular Photography*.

Camera, introduced in 1947, delivered a developed print a minute or so after exposure and thus inaugurated an era of virtually instant gratification in image making.

Many were amazed and enthusiastic, but there were scoffers and critics, too, who ridiculed the poor quality of those early, sepia-toned, easily marred Polaroid prints, and who dismissed the entire messy and frequently unpredictable process as merely a passing gimmick.

However, millions of Polaroid pictures were made within the first year of its use; the quality of the film steadily improved, and it soon became evident that instant photography was here to stay. On the other hand, Polaroid never did, as some had predicted, come close to supplanting conventional photography.

Some 40 years later, instant photography has established itself as a powerful tool in virtually all aspects of applied image making (in industrial, medical and scientific research). As a mass-consumer item, it seems to have reached its peak and is on a plateau, or is perhaps even declining, although Polaroid photography is still popular with millions of people around the world. But to look at it from another perspective, what significance, if any, has the instant image had within the mainstream of American art photography?

A recent and ambitious attempt to answer that question can be found in the exhibition and accompanying book, *Legacy of Light*. The exhibition opened at the International Center of Photography in New York and was also shown at the DeCordova and Dana Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts. Portraits from the exhibition were on view at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. The excellently printed book accompanying the exhibit includes 205 color and black-and-white Polaroid photographs from some 58 American photographers and artists, with an introduction by art critic Peter Schjeldahl





Lucas Samaras, "Still Life with Orchid," 1984.

Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

and essays by poets and novelists, including Richard Howard, Diane Johnson and Robert Stone.

The exhibition has an edge over the book because of the matter of scale, which counts here at both ends of the size spectrum. Instant photography's one-shot prints range from the petite to the monstrous. At the International Center of Photography exhibition one could be visually overwhelmed with a billboard-sized image from the giant Polaroid camera at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, enjoy the tactile experience of richly saturated color and high-fidelity detail in 51-by-62-centimeter prints from a studio camera, and appreciate the miniaturist charm of 10-by-13-centimeter contact prints from black-and-white negative material.

If the printed page can't convey the spatial impact of the exhibition, it does focus attention on form, style and content. *Legacy of Light* is organized into four major sections: Landscape, Portrait, The Nude,

and Object and Form, resulting in a wide and generally satisfying variety of images. These include much familiar work by renowned masters of the medium such as Ansel Adams, Paul Caponigro, Marie Cosindas, Imogen Cunningham, Walker Evans and Minor White; as well as more recent work by Robert Frank, Emmet Gowin, David Hockney, Olivia Parker, Rosamond Purcell, Lucas Samaras, Philip Trager and other contemporary masters; and portfolios by relatively young, less well-known photographers such as Bill Burke, Jan Groover and Nancy Hellebrand.

The variety of personal vision, individual style and technical execution thus assembled is extraordinary. "Bridalveil Fall and Cathedral Peaks, Yosemite National Park," 1968, and "Merced River, Winter, Yosemite National Park," ca. 1959, work together to portray a romantic

landscape that is quintessentially Ansel Adams, while Robert Frank's "Pour la Fille," 1980, is alive with a breeze that flutters flowers. The hard-edged realism of Bill Burke's "KPNLF Soldier, Lake Ampil, Cambodia, 1984" intensifies a disturbing confrontation, while David Hockney's "Gary and Doug, L.A., March 6, 1982" fractures two human personalities into squares of space and time. Hot colors sizzle in Barbara Kasten's sharp-edged geometrical constructions, while soft sepia tones set the mood in Jan Groover's gentle still lifes.

*Legacy of Light* abundantly documents that instant photography, in the right hands, now can do just about anything conventional photography can do. It no longer needs to be bracketed as a special subset or apologized for, as if it were a willing but somewhat backward child in need of extra encouragement. For the art photographer today, instant photographic materials and equipment are much less a challenge and a problem than they once were. They have become an extension of the photographer's creative arsenal.

As with all photographs, instant images derive their effectiveness from the insight, personal vision and technical skill of the photographer. The visual energy generated by the images in *Legacy of Light* is a tribute to the creativity of the men and women who contributed their pictures to it, and to Polaroid Corporation's enlightened policy of consistently encouraging photographers to experiment with the company's materials.

All the work is, of course, to some extent conditioned by the medium used, but that seems secondary. Ansel Adams's photographs are unmistakably Adams, as Robert Frank's are Frank, and Arnold Newman's are his own.

Without external clues it would be difficult to identify much of the work as instant photography. Rarely does its most striking property—the immediate production of a print—seem to make an important contribution, even with the portraits. A good Polaroid picture is a good picture, period. And if you didn't know better, *Legacy of Light*



might even pass for a general survey of trends in American art photography during the past 30 years. Paradoxically, but perhaps inevitably, as instant photography has matured and become absorbed in that mainstream, it has lost some of the quirky distinctiveness that once made it such an interesting special case and a catalyst of creativity. ♦

## THEATER

### Glasnost on Stage

A WALK IN THE WOODS. By Lee Blessing.

Reviewed by John Simon

There are a few things wrong with *A Walk in the Woods*, but let us attend first to what makes it eminently welcome on Broadway. To begin with, it is not a family play: nothing has become so facile and monotonous as the eternal family comedy or drama, usually tailored to the limited talents of some TV star eager to return to his roots. Even somewhat different and better family plays cannot quite eradicate the sense that the genre has honorably earned the right to a rest.

Second, *A Walk in the Woods* is not a play about the usual issues that have been bombarding us with numbing predictability. It is not about a sensitive, misunderstood soul, often on his or her way to becoming a writer, coming to terms with growing up, society, life. I am happy to say that neither of Blessing's two characters—the seasoned Soviet diplomat Andrey Botvinnik or the American tyro John Honeyman—is based on Blessing himself, which these days is a very real blessing. And the play is not about the problems of maintaining a sexual

relationship, although Honeyman and Botvinnik become something like surrogate lovers in the games they play with each other—but it's all platonic.

Third, this is not yet another of those the-way-we-yuppies-live-now comedies that shamelessly proliferate nowadays; nor is it the rural equivalent about good ol' boys boozing it up in some backwater polluted with cuteness. And, fourth, it is not obsessed with yesterday's crusades about race, the Vietnam War, women's lib, gay lib, etc.—all of which are more than entitled to a hearing, but not the same one over and over.

No, *A Walk in the Woods* is a political play, and, irresponsibly apolitical as I tend to be, I still recognize the crying need for the American theater to concern itself with the pressing, oppressive subject of global politics, because that is a matter that concerns all of us equally and is too important to be abandoned to the words of politicians and the minds of journalists. We should ponder, as Czechoslovak

writer Milan Kundera does in his provocative new collection, *The Art of the Novel*, that "the history of the planet has finally become one indivisible whole, but it is war, ambulant and everlasting war, that embodies and guarantees this long-desired unity of mankind. Unity of mankind means: no escape for anyone anywhere." Blessing ponders this in his play, pointedly, poignantly, wittily—and unponderously.

All right, the defects. Paul Nitze of the United States and Yuli Kvitsinsky of the Soviet Union, the two actual negotiators in Geneva on whom the play is remotely based, took one walk in the woods, reached a sensible agreement, and were promptly overruled by their respective governments. And whereas the one-time-only walk of Nitze and Kvitsinsky was an admirable attempt to cut through red and red-white-and-blue tape, four such walks—one for each season, as in the play—are neither believable nor desirable: a table is required to put your cards on, in arms conferences as in poker. But let us not deny the



Sam Waterston (left) and Robert Prosky as U.S. and Soviet arms negotiators.

© 1988 Peter Cunningham

John Simon is drama critic for New York magazine.

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playwright a little poetic or political license. And, yes, it may be a mite precious to have computerized leaves punctuating the autumn scene as they flutter down in scientifically random patterns, or to have spring burst out in symmetrical and plastic flowers, a little too perfect even for the Switzerland that the play drolly blames for being so peaceful and idyllic as to lure arms conferences into going on forever, unresolved but restful.

Those woods may be more of a park, with that nice downstage-center bench on and around which the action—or, if you insist, the talk—of the play circles, falters, hurtles and ebbs away. But the play earns the privilege of being a Platonic dialogue with no other overt action than an unsuccessful chase after a stray rabbit. For it knows how to turn words into action as the fatuous but idealistic American and the cynical but also humane Russian fence, flirt, tangle, crush, evade with every form of small and heavy talk, as if badinage were foils and verbal outbursts sledgehammers. Above all, as in Shaw but less brilliantly, the dialogue demands a think-along.

The subject is not new, but valid and dramatically unexhausted in Blessing's treatment. First: peace conferences accomplish very little, mostly small concessions covering up a proliferating arms buildup. But they keep up appearances, offer hope and obviate actual warfare. Second: individuals from opposite sides of the East-West fence can come to understand and even cherish each other, but one superpower cannot afford to trust the other. Or thinks it can't, which comes to the same. To dramatize this accurately, playfully, thoughtfully will not save the world—no play will—but does make for challenging and pleasurable theatergoing.

Too bad that the outdoor-indoor set, though clever, is also a bit pretentious, and that director Des McAnuff has seen fit to introduce some movieish background music

and quasi-subliminal sound effects. But he has directed the moods and movements of the characters, their pauses and eruptions, the feints and choreography of their conversation and body language with exemplary skill and variety. Robert Prosky as Botvinnik occasionally lapses into excessive loveliness, but otherwise his Russian diplomat is charmingly idiosyncratic and cannily polished. Sam Waterston, finally cast not against type but as what he is best at—an overgrown, whining baby, shuttling between spurts of beady-eyed enthusiasm and disgruntled sulking, yet somehow innocent enough to be petted—is just right as Honeyman. And *A Walk in the Woods* is particularly shrewd in not making the political issues overly specific, and in keeping its juicy characters dangling on the edge of stereotypes (or, equally prefabricated, antistereotypes) only to achieve last-minute deflections into genuine sagacious wit. A little too eager to be accessible, to please with dabs of sentiment, this is a play to make the average viewer enjoy thinking; a foot note in dramatic history, but a minor miracle on Broadway. ♦

## ECONOMICS

### The U.S. Government's Bank

SECRETS OF THE TEMPLE: HOW THE FEDERAL RESERVE RUNS THE COUNTRY. By William Greider. *Simon & Schuster*. 798 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Kuttner

Most Americans first encountered "the money issue" in secondary school or college history texts, where they learned that for some inexplicable reason 19th-century Americans had a bizarre obsession

with the currency. In repeated episodes that students dutifully memorized but seldom grasped, fringe parties regularly proposed cranky remedies like 16-to-one ratios between gold and silver. And oddly enough, ordinary people apparently spent a good deal of their time debating monetary arcana.

As William Greider explains in his masterful *Secrets of the Temple*, the 19th-century fixation with money was no oddity. Before the creation of the Federal Reserve in 1913, private Wall Street banks—the famous "money trust" of populist oratory—served as the de facto central bank, and they didn't serve Main Street America very well. Whenever an economic contraction struck, money in the provinces dried up, local banks ran short of currency, loans were called, and farmers and local businesses went broke. Whenever money was plentiful, whether because of greenback dollars or frontier banking or accidental gold discoveries, the heartland could expand. Ordinary people could prosper. When money was tight, Wall Street did nicely, thank you, but Main Street didn't.

The money question, then as now, was both a class conflict between financial capital and productive enterprise, as well as a conflict between caution and boundless optimism, between the old money of the past, representing the financial haves, and the aspirations of the have-nots. The invention of the Federal Reserve, as Greider recounts the tale, was one of the great ironies of American history. After one banking panic too many, Wall Street conservatives appropriated an idea from the populists. Money creation would be taken out of the hands of private banks and vested in a quasi-public agency. Yet far from being democratized, the "money issue" would be effectively removed from public discourse, secreted in an esoteric temple of central banking, with political accountability largely limited to other bankers and bondholders.

Robert Kuttner writes on economics for The New Republic. His most recent book is *The Life of the Party: Democratic Prospects in 1988 and Beyond*.

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Despite its removal from democratic debate, money remains an intensely political question. Greider's achievement, in this monumental yet readable book, is to demystify the money question and restore it to popular dialogue, where it of course belongs. Bankers are no brighter than the rest of us. If they can understand the Fed, so can we.

On one level, *Secrets of the Temple* is a virtuoso investigative history of the Fed from 1979 to 1987, under the leadership of Paul Volcker, and an account of the Reagan Administration's economic policy. It is also an enlightening treatise on the mythic, cultural and financial aspects of money, the mechanics of central banking and the Fed as a political creature.

Greider is obviously very persuasive at getting people to talk, for he has gotten dozens of normally circumspect central bankers to tell delicious tales. There are more than a handful of bombshells in the book, but Greider is astute enough to let them serve as expository guideposts rather than mere sensational revelations. The best such disclosure is the discovery that when the Federal Reserve in 1979 disingenuously ceased targeting interest rates and ostensibly converted to the monetarist dogma of manipulating the money supply, this was Volcker's deliberate and cynical device for creating a painful bout of disinflation while avoiding the direct political blame. Many people inferred the game after the fact; Greider gets the players to admit that this was their intent going in.

Greider also effectively documents that the Fed badly botched the job. Because the measured "money supply" in fact reflects borrower behavior as well as central-banker intent, it proved extremely slippery, a "wayward lodestar" in Greider's fine phrase. As a conse-

quence, the 1981-83 recession in the United States, induced by badly managed tight money, was far deeper and more damaging than necessary, leaving a prolonged legacy of real interest rates higher than at any time in America's economic history. When inflation was finally slain in 1983, Volcker emerged as the hero of the opinion-leader class (which suffered few of the effects), revered by Democrats and Republicans alike. But in Greider's careful account, Volcker is exposed as not only excessively puritanical, imposing unnecessary suffering, but often inept as well. Greider also sheds new light on the symbiosis between the Reagan Administration's fiscal policy and the monetary policy that Reaganism has allowed the Fed to justify.

At bottom, Greider's basic point is that the Federal Reserve is profoundly undemocratic, principally loyal to the bond market rather than to the larger productive economy. Bondholders, above all, want high real returns, usually at the expense of easier money and economic expansion. "Stability" is an overrated virtue. Except during unusual periods, such as the New Dealer Mariner Eccles's tenure as Fed chairman during the 1940s, when real interest rates were kept low, the Fed is the instrument of creditors. Lately, tight money has triumphed over economic possibility yet again.

Greider's framework also helps put the appeal of Ronald Reagan into better perspective. Finance, he writes, is "an exchange across time." For Greider, the real conflict of classes is not just between rich and poor, but between established wealth and economic possibility. Viewed through that lens, Texan wildcatters, drilling wells on the chance of finding oil, may be multimillionaires but they are also populists, because they are high rollers in a way that bondholders are not. And so is Ronald Reagan. In that surprising sense, Reagan has more in common with populist President Andrew Jackson than with financier Andrew Mellon. Indeed, the Volcker era at the Fed ended when he was finally outvoted (and in effect voted out) by Reagan's loose-

money appointees.

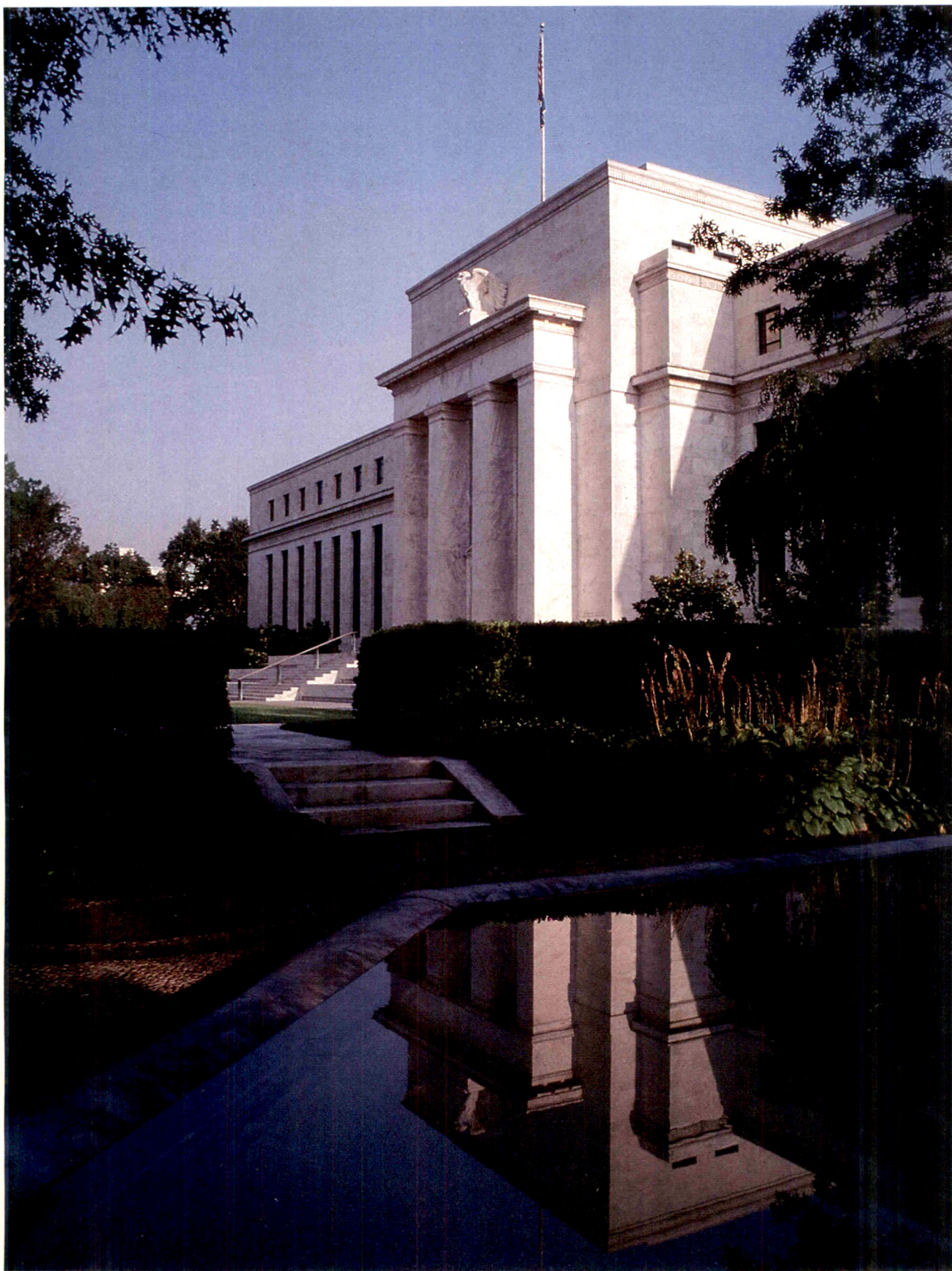
William Greider will be criticized largely on three grounds: as radical, as too cavalier about the risks of inflation and as verbose. The first of these is fair; his book is splendidly radical—on a subject that only a radical would dare deconstruct.

But while Greider does point out, repeatedly, that deflation serves the creditor class and that inflation is often both proexpansion and proredistribution, he stops just short of advocating inflation as deliberate policy. Rather, he takes the sound-money class to task for overdoing disinflation. More precisely, he contends that the allocation of credit, though disguised as the decision of free markets, is inevitably political and ought to be explicitly democratized, as an alternative to the more punishing (and usual) course of alternately deflating or inflating the entire economy to serve monetary ends.

And though *Secrets* is long, it is rarely long-winded. For the most part the writing is so good that if the text sometimes sprawls, it rarely sags.

*Secrets* is populist in yet another aspect, which makes one cherish Greider as a fellow journalist. His is one of those rare books in which a nonspecialist takes on a difficult topic with fresh eyes; spends several years getting his mind around it; combines meticulous reporting with expository virtuosity; and renders a treatment that is both more comprehensive and more accessible (and hence more democratic) than the conventional treatment by the experts. In that respect, *Secrets* joins J. Anthony Lukas's *Common Ground*, David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest* and Richard Kluger's *Simple Justice* in a class with perhaps a half dozen such books of our time. ♦





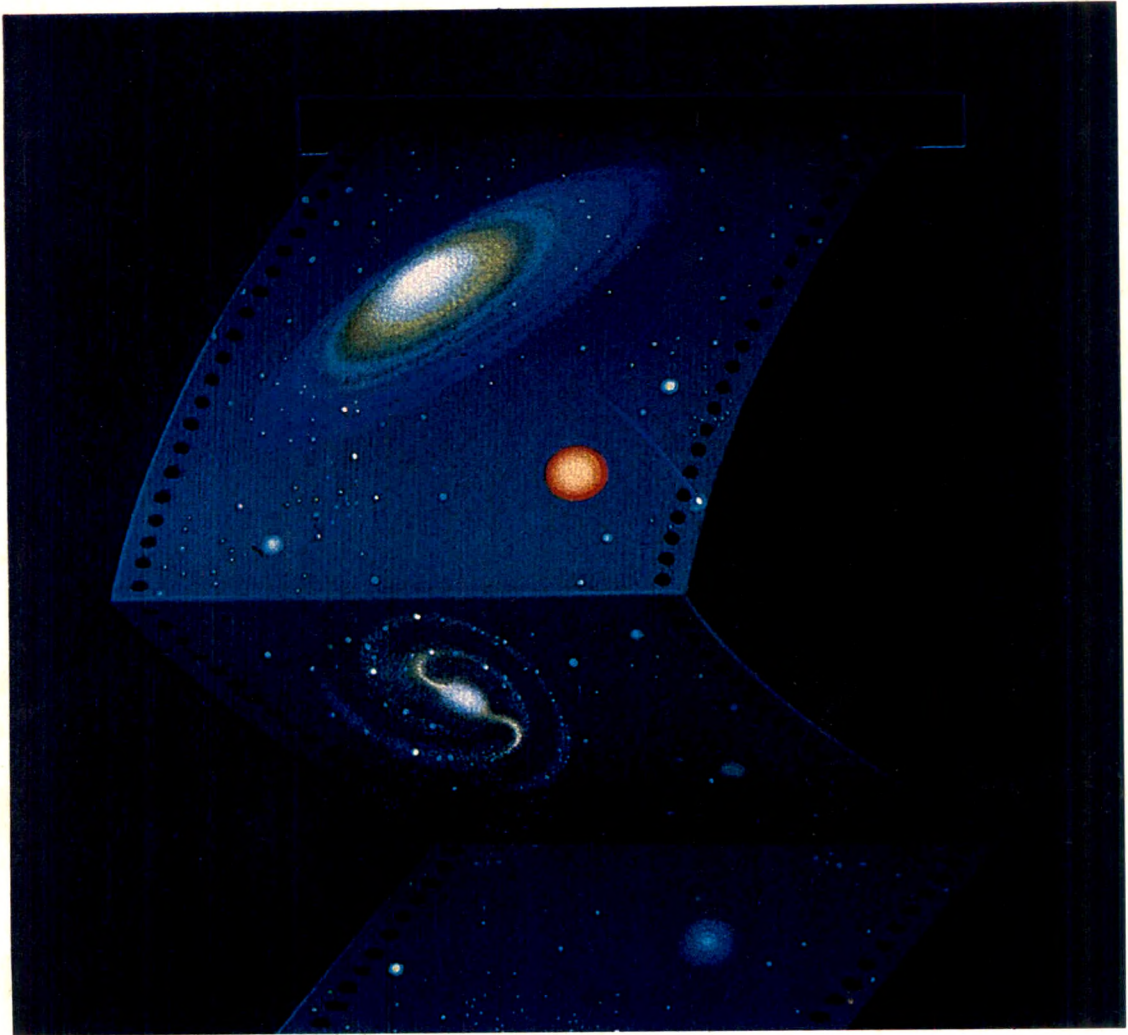
**Headquarters of the U.S. Federal Reserve System in Washington, D.C.**

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# THE AMERICAN REVIEW

2/1989



## IS THE UNIVERSE A COMPUTER?

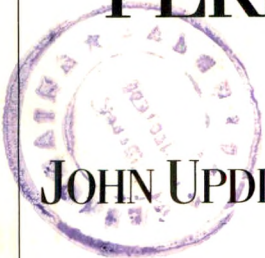
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## FERMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

*ALSO*

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# Portrait of a Jazzman

*The great jazz saxophonist Charlie "Bird" Parker (1920-55) is played by Forest Whitaker in the acclaimed new movie Bird. In the late 1940s and early '50s Parker's inspired improvisations, with their breakneck tempos, unpredictable melodies and dissonant harmonies, became the basis for a new kind of jazz called "bebop." This film brings Bird back to life in an unusual way: the soundtrack includes previously unreleased solos by Parker from his wife's collection. Bird is directed by jazz aficionado Clint Eastwood, best known as the star of action movies.*



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COVER: *The universe as a gigantic computer printout. See page 42. Illustration by Robert Giusti.*



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# MORAL JUDGMENT AND POLITICAL ACTION

By Peter L. Berger

Sociology can provide a guide for making morally responsible decisions by revealing the vested interests lurking behind lofty rhetoric.

*What is the relation between power and virtue? This is both an ancient and a very modern question. Political philosophers from Plato onwards have debated the issue. In this essay, one of America's foremost sociologists exhorts politicians to operate with "the ethic of responsibility" (borrowing a phrase from Max Weber) and consider the moral consequences of their actions. He argues that social scientists, trained in the discipline of detached analysis, can help us see these ethical choices more clearly. Sociologists, he says, are professional debunkers, skilled in the "art of mistrust," "looking beneath and behind the facades of social life."*

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The topic I have chosen is age-old. It has been pondered over for centuries by sages and lesser minds in all the great civilizations. It is, in the final analysis, the relation of power and virtue. Not exactly a narrow, circumscribed topic. But it is not my intention to announce the discovery of some new points of political ethics that were lamentably overlooked by Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine or Confucius. My intention is more modest. It is to report on some insights that I think I have gained over the years in trying to relate my own intellectual discipline, that of sociology, to the political challenges we face in the modern world as citizens of a democracy. Put differently, my attempt is to show how a social-scientific perspective may be useful to anyone who seeks to act politically in a morally responsible way.

It is now 70 years since Max Weber delivered his famous lecture "Politics as a Vocation" at the University of Munich. That moment was dramatic—one year after Germany's catastrophic defeat in World War I, in the city that was the epicenter of revolutionary turmoil both of the Left and the Right, with an audience of students many of whom were veterans of the war, bearing its physical and psychic scars. In this lecture Weber among other things made the distinction between two types of ethics that he called *Gesinnungsethik* and *Ver-*

*antwortungsethik*, roughly translatable as an "ethic of attitude" and an "ethic of responsibility." Much of the lecture consists of Weber's eloquent advocacy of the latter. It is a measure of Weber's stature that, despite all the differences between that moment in history and our own, his argument is uncannily, even urgently, relevant to anyone who today wants to act politically in a morally defensible manner.

*Gesinnungsethik* is the view that what matters morally is the attitude of the actor; if that attitude is morally pure, then the actions following from it are morally valid. *Gesinnungsethik* has also been more freely translated as an "ethic of absolute ends": if the ends of action are morally unexceptional, then the actor can leave aside the weighing of means and consequences. The extreme form of this ethical stance is well expressed in the Roman adage "*fiat iustitia pereat mundus*"—"let justice be done, let the world perish." It is worth noting that, while firmly rejecting this moral stance, Weber had a good deal of respect for it. For him, such an ethic was typified by the pacifism of Tolstoy, a man he greatly admired.

Be this as it may, let me say that I too would not altogether repudiate this moral stance in certain instances. For example, I'm unalterably, passionately (if you like, dogmatically) opposed to capital punishment. My reason for this is my conviction that capital punishment is an act of such monstrous

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cruelty that it ought not to be in the arsenal of legal sanctions of a civilized society. Now, holding this moral belief and the attitude (*Gesinnung*) that goes with it, I'm not really interested (at least not morally interested) in the debate as to whether capital punishment does or does not deter certain crimes such as murder. As far as I can judge, those who argue that it does not deter have the better evidence. But if the weight of evidence should shift to the other side, I would not be shaken in my position.

Yet even here, where a moral belief is absolute and ipso facto meta-political, I must weigh means and probable consequences if I want to act politically in order to abolish capital punishment. I would not, say, advocate assaulting judges who impose the death penalty, or take this issue as the only one by which a candidate for office is to be judged, or work toward the destruction of the entire American legal system because it tolerates this barbarity. And my reasons for not recommending or embarking upon such courses of action are, of course, based on an assessment of consequences as well as chances of success. With such an assessment, I already step into the realm of an "ethic of responsibility." In other words, as soon as I want to achieve empirical results by my actions, I must entertain considerations other than those dictated by my moral absolutes. I step, if you will, into the realm of political logic, which allows few if any absolutes.

#### NO GUARANTEES

Weber was right in his central proposition: whatever the ultimate source or status of our moral beliefs, when we seek to be politically effective, we can only operate with an "ethic of responsibility." What we must then do is calculate the appropriateness of available means to desired ends, to look at the probabilities of success, to attempt to foresee both intended and unintended consequences. Needless to say, we now step from a world of moral certainties to a world of uncertainty, rela-

tivity and compromise. This latter world, of course, is the world of the empirical—the messy, confusing, often deadly reality of human history. There are no guarantees in this world. It is precisely at this point that the social sciences come in; they are, after all, concerned with illuminating this empirical reality of human action. Here, I propose to suggest some intellectual contributions that the social sciences can make toward morally responsible action in the political arena.

In recent years there has been endless discussion in the social sciences about what Weber called "value-freeness"—that is, about the question of whether the social sciences can or should be morally neutral. At the risk of simplification, the quarrel has been between two groups responding to Weber's theory—on one side, positivists who maintain that facts in the human sciences are just like facts in the natural sciences; on the other side, theorists (interestingly on both the Left and the Right, such as Marxists and Straussians) who insist that all human facts are subject to interpretation and therefore inaccessible to morally neutral analysis. Both groups, I think, are partially right but finally mistaken (and I also think, by the way, that Weber is still the best guide through this methodological minefield). Human society is constituted by meanings, and therefore there are, indeed, no "naked facts" over and beyond interpretation. The positivists are wrong when they think that one can do sociology in the way one does zoology: the human beings studied by the sociologists give meaning to their existence, the insects studied by the zoologist (as far as we know) do not, and this difference has far-reaching methodological implications for the two sciences. But when the sociologist tries to understand human beings, it is *their* meanings that he must try to understand, and he cannot do this when he imposes his own. It is

this, no more but also no less, that Weber intended by his concept of "value-freeness." Both Marxists and the disciples of Leo Strauss, the political philosopher whose study of the classics influenced several generations of American political scientists, are wrong in thinking that this cannot be achieved.

#### THE DISCIPLINE OF DETACHMENT

Ideologues of all political colorations have sought to enlist the human sciences as "weapons" in the war of ideas. The late Dr. Goebbels put it very clearly: "Truth is what serves the German people." Such use of any science destroys its essential character as a disinterested quest for truth. The social scientist has no special qualification as a moralist; his qualification, if any, lies in his trained capacity to assess empirical evidence. Part and parcel of this training is the discipline of detachment—that is, an ability to look at a situation clearly, to bracket one's own feelings and convictions in the effort to understand what others feel and believe, to listen rather than preach; most important of all, to look at reality even if what comes into view is very much different from what one would wish to be there. This discipline of detachment, of course, is a circumscribed, artificial act. It should not, and indeed cannot, be carried over into the rest of the social scientist's life. Yet, even though limited to specific acts of understanding, it constitutes no mean moral achievement—the capacity to control passion without in any way abandoning it, to cultivate the calm look, to have respect for the real. In this, I would contend, the modern social scientist stands in a great philosophical tradition of what the Greeks called the "theoretical life" (*bios theoretikos*).

Let me cite an example from recent American sociology. A few years ago Kristin Luker, a sociologist who teaches at the University of California, San Diego, published a book entitled *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*. Luker interviewed two groups of women in California, prochoice and prolife activists



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*When we seek to be politically effective, we can operate only with an 'ethic of responsibility,' to attempt to foresee both intended and unintended consequences. This is the world of the empirical—the messy reality of human history.*

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[women supporting and opposing liberalized abortion laws]. Her findings threw original and very interesting light on the social characteristics of these two groups. Luker also tried to draw a portrait of the two world views at issue, brilliantly so, I thought. This is why I reviewed her book. I thought that this book, quite apart from the intrinsic significance of its empirical findings, was an excellent illustration of the sociology of knowledge applied to a concrete social phenomenon. What impressed me particularly, and I said so in my review, was that one could read the book from one end to the other without finding out how Luker herself stood on this issue. In other words, to a remarkable degree she showed her discipline of detachment. There is an ironic and (to me) depressing sequel. I was told later that Luker was a committed feminist with strong prochoice views. I was also told later (by hearsay) that Luker subsequently expressed regret that she had not avowed her strong commitment to prochoice views in her book. In other words, if this account is correct, she confessed as a vice the very detachment that I saw as a major virtue in her book. Whatever may be the facts in this particular case, there is a lot of confusion about morality and methodology in current sociology, and the confusion undercuts the very contribution that sociologists are qualified to make to public debate.

In everyday life we constantly employ two kinds of presuppositions: norms tell us what the world ought to be and how we ought to act; but these norms are supposed to hold in a world that is real, and we hold a large number of assumptions as to what that reality is. Norms have

little if any meaning without the cognitive presuppositions that go with them. For example, anthropologists tell us (correctly, I imagine) that one of the most ancient human norms is the incest taboo. This norm tells me that I must not have sexual relations with a close relative. Fine; but who are my "close relatives"? Thus in a particular culture the general norm translates itself into a very specific injunction: "You may not marry your fifth cousin!" I wonder how many of us have the foggiest notion of what a fifth cousin is, let alone who might be the individuals of the opposite sex falling into this solemnly proscribed category of people. In other words, we simply (and perhaps to our great loss) lack the cognitive presupposition that would give practical meaning to this norm. A good anthropologist can, of course, tell us why. That is, anthropology as an interpretive human science can draw a "cognitive map" of modern American culture, duly note the absence of these kinship categories from it, and thus explain why the utterance of moral anathemas against those who marry fifth cousins leaves contemporary Americans puzzled and definitely not overwhelmed by pangs of guilt. This dependence of norms on a set of cognitive assumptions holds generally.

Now, there are cases in which norms directly clash. In that case, the social sciences can clarify the clash but they can do nothing to resolve it. Example: during my military service in the 1950s I was stationed in the deep South. This was my first personal experience of racial segregation, and it

shocked me profoundly. Being a newly minted sociologist, I did a good deal of reading about this matter. I recall a conversation with a very intelligent and well-read white southerner, a fellow draftee, to whom I communicated all my newly acquired knowledge about race relations. To my surprise, my interlocutor agreed with everything I said: yes, race was a myth; yes, the myth justified the power and privilege of whites; and so on. Well, I then asked him, how is it that you are not morally troubled by this state of affairs? He shrugged his shoulders and said: "I do very well under this system, and I see no reason why I should feel or do anything that is against my own interests." That was not the end of the conversation, but I realized very sharply that no additional amount of empirical evidence could help in dissuading him from a position that I found morally repugnant; the conversation had to move to a different plane, one of ethical and philosophical discourse.

#### **A MAKER OF MAPS**

At least as common, however, are cases in which sharp disagreements occur between people who have no normative differences in the abstract, but whose divergent cognitive presuppositions lead them to diametrically opposed political and moral conclusions as these norms are concretely applied. Let me take an example here from the area in which I have done most of my work as a sociologist for the last 20 years, the area of Third World development. Over the years I have had many discussions with proponents of Liberation Theology, in Latin America and elsewhere. One of the best-known phrases coming out of this movement is the *preferential option for the poor*. There are some nuanced differences in the way this



phrase has been used by different authors, but the underlying moral proposition is very clear: the condition of the poor should be the yardstick by which we judge both a society and any projects for changing it. In context, of course, this proposition is further undergirded by reference to the New Testament and a long tradition of Christian ethics.

Now, I have no problem whatever with this proposition. My profound difficulties with most liberation theologians lie not at all in the normative sphere; rather I have great difficulties with their cognitive presuppositions. These, of course, are mostly taken over from the new-Marxist theory of Third World underdevelopment. Thus most liberation theologians believe the following: that Third World underdevelopment is caused by capitalism; that the Third World is poor because the First World is rich—that is, our wealth depends on their poverty; and (the most important political implication) that socialism is the way out of Third World poverty. It is my opinion, based not on some ethical theorizing but on the reading of the evidence, that every one of these beliefs is empirically false. And, because this is my understanding of the empirical realities, I believe that the socialist strategies recommended by most of these authors are politically disastrous and morally irresponsible—precisely because they will in all likelihood lead to more poverty, more oppression, more exploitation.

The image of the mapmaker is heuristically useful. The social scientist is a maker of maps. If you want to travel from point X to point Y, a map will be useful to you. It can tell you a lot about the territory you must traverse. But it can tell you nothing about the purpose of your journey, or whether you should undertake it in the first place. And the map will be useful to you only if it can be equally useful to someone who undertakes the journey for very different, possibly antagonistic purposes. The mapmaker has no qualifications to advise you about the moral status of your intended journey. His map, of necessity, is morally neutral. But, of course, this does not mean at all that the mapmaker, as a human being, has no moral responsibilities. He

may decide that the purpose of your journey is so odious, morally, that he will try to withhold the map from you. It is beyond my scope to discuss the moral possibility that, in certain cases, a mapmaker may decide to draw a deliberately inaccurate map so as to mislead a putatively odious traveler. It should be quite clear, though, that whatever it is that a mapmaker is doing when he distorts reality for moral reasons, it is *not* social science.

### LOOKING FOR VESTED INTERESTS

Much of the output of the human sciences over the last two centuries or so can aptly be subsumed under Nietzsche's category of the "art of mistrust." Historians have asked who really wrote a text, psychologists have tried to unmask people's real motives and so on. The contribution of sociology has been to locate actors and their ideas within society, and in the same process to uncover their vested interests. Put differently, the sociologist is the character who, when confronted with any statement of belief or value, will invariably ask the prototypically mistrustful question, "Says who?" This question, disagreeable though it sounds, is of great importance in clarifying any situation in society and especially any situation within which one intends to act politically. Suppose that one encounters a movement that pushes the idea that the consumption of bananas causes leprosy. This movement, of course, will present alleged scientific evidence on the "leprogenic" effects of bananas. It will not surprise one that this evidence is vigorously disputed by the association of banana growers. If one is a sociologist, one will be only slightly surprised to discover that the antibanana movement is sponsored by the league of mango producers. In other words, the sociologist will always look for vested interests, and most of the time the search is successful. It is very important to understand that this disclosure of vested interests in play does not settle the medical question as to whether bananas do or do not cause

leprosy. But it is very useful to know about the two sets of vested interests in order to understand what is going on here, and especially so if one has a political involvement in the issue (say, one is a legislator pondering a bill banning banana advertising).

As a smoker, I have had an intermittent interest over the years in the antismoking movement, which continuously inveighs against what it calls the "smoking interests"—namely, the tobacco industry and its allies in government. Of course the movement marshals putatively scientific evidence to advance its cause, and of course the tobacco industry has been questioning this evidence. There are indeed "smoking interests" (talk to any legislator from, say, the tobacco-growing state of North Carolina). What should not have surprised me but did was the discovery that there are also antismoking interests—an international consortium of health activists and bureaucrats who have an enormous stake (in terms of money, power and status) in the success of the movement. And the approach to and use of the evidence by this consortium is as *interested* (that is, biased and, when necessary, selective) as anything evinced by the other side in the debate. Needless to say, this sociological discovery in no way answers the question whether smoking does or does not cause all the diseases now listed on cigarette packages. But an intriguing question now emerges: the scientific evidence on this issue is exceedingly complicated; most of it is based on sophisticated statistics. Few people are competent to form an independent opinion. This means that their position, if any, is based on faith in this or that authority. In recent years in the United States, this has meant faith in statements by the surgeon general, the head of an agency of the federal government. Now ask yourself why people who will not believe one word pronounced by, say, the secretary of state believe that a matter is closed because the surgeon general says so. It is a sociologically fruitful question to ask!

There is a considerable tradition in modern social thought, going back to Nietzsche, Marx and even before,



*Much of the output of the human sciences over the last two centuries can be subsumed under Nietzsche's category of the 'art of mistrust.' The sociologist is the character who, when confronted with any statement of belief, asks: 'Says who?'*

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seeking to expose the relation between ideas and interests. An important question has been whether there are any ideas that are or can be held in a disinterested way. I believe there are. But it is a very good rule, whenever any individual or group propounds an alleged truth, to ask whether these people have anything to gain from the allegation. One cannot always answer yes; more often than not, one can. It remains a crucial fact to keep in mind if one decides to look at the world as it is rather than as what one would like it to be.

Let me go back to Kristin Luker's work on abortion in California. The most striking finding coming out of her research was that the two groups of activists, prochoice and prolife, were amazingly polarized in terms of occupation and education, in sociological parlance, in terms of *class*. Luker's findings have been supported by other research: it seems that the principal factor determining an individual's (male or female) attitude toward abortion is class—more so even than religion. What this means is very simple: the higher up one goes in the American class system, the more one finds people with proabortion attitudes. Why should this be so? Luker's data (which deal only with women, but we know that men follow the same pattern) give a clear answer: motherhood is a principal social asset for working-class and lower-middle-class women. Whatever may be the ethical and philosophical aspects of this issue, the way in which people come out on it is very much linked to vested interests, on both sides.

What is even more intriguing is that attitudes toward abortion are embedded in much larger constellations of beliefs and values which are also class-driven. In this connection let me mention what I consider to be one of the

most fruitful hypotheses in recent American social science, that of the so-called New Class. I prefer the term *knowledge class*. The hypothesis proposes that there has been a split in what used to be a unified middle class. Where previously there was one, there are now two middle classes. One is the old middle class, derived from the historic bourgeoisie and still centered in the business community. The other is a class constituted by those who derive their livelihood and their status from the production and distribution of knowledge (especially symbolic knowledge—that is, knowledge unrelated to material goods or services). The hypothesis not only affirms that this new knowledge exists (that would be a simple matter of classification) but that it has specific characteristics in terms of world view and lifestyle. There is now considerable empirical support for this hypothesis. The evidence shows that, broadly speaking, the new knowledge class is to the left politically of the old middle class. Why should this be so?

#### **POLITICS AS A VOCATION**

Again, an analysis of vested interests helps us to understand what otherwise would be quite puzzling. In Western democracies, by and large, to be on the left now rarely means embracing a socialist agenda. Rather, the ongoing debate between Left and Right concerns the scope and nature of government intervention in both the economy and social life. More specifically, the Left favors the maintenance and extension of the machinery of the welfare state, while the Right is suspicious of it and seeks to limit it. Once one looks at this debate

in terms of class interests, all mystery disappears. For the business community, the welfare state is, in the main, a liability. The new knowledge class, on the other hand, heavily depends on government subsidization, and indeed many of its members are employed in welfare-state bureaucracies. Put differently, much of the current Left/Right debate is between those with an interest in redistribution and those who have a vested interest in production. Now, it cannot be emphasized strongly enough that such an insight does not, and cannot, resolve any single question raised in the debate, or directly lead to a moral judgment: I may understand that the business class has an interest in lower taxes and the knowledge class in tax-funded policies of redistribution, and I might still decide that morality supports a position favorable to either interest. But I would contend that such an exercise in sociological debunking actually facilitates a clear moral decision. People, of course, always claim that the other fellow has vested interests; one's own position, by contrast, is motivated by pure love of humankind or by a disinterested search for truth. This claim, subjected to social-scientific scrutiny, almost never stands up. But this knowledge liberates rather than cripples moral judgment. One now understands that there are vested interests all around any given issue, and this understanding gives one a better chance to make a moral judgment on the merits of the case. Once one grasps the power of vested interests in shaping human beliefs and values, one will pay special attention to moral judgments that appear to be *contrary* to the vested interests of those making them.

When Weber used the word *vocation* to refer to politics, he knew what associations he was invoking. He had,



after all, discussed at great length the permutations of the Christian notion of vocation in his single most important book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. A vocation is an occupation to which one is called—by God, by fate, by circumstance, perhaps by inner necessity. By implication some individuals may have this vocation, others not. I have never been persuaded by those (some on the Left, some on the Right) who have urged that everyone has the obligation to be politically active. It seems to me that this is a very narrow, ultimately oppressive view of the political. Even in a democracy—perhaps especially in a democracy—one should concede the right of individuals *not* to be active in or even concerned with politics. Their vocation may be to care for the sick. Or to raise children. Or, for that matter, to paint ideograms on silk screens. But some of us *will* be called to political action, if not as a permanent occupation, then in certain situations or at certain junctures in our lives. This vocation has serious moral implications.

### TAKING RISKS

It has been a commonplace of the so-called policy sciences that the more an actor knows about a situation, the more effective he will be in it. But the social scientist knows that however much we know about a situation, our knowledge will be incomplete and less than certain. Contrary to popular notions, science is the realm, not of certainty, but of probabilities. The only certainties to be had in human life are in the realm of the *raison du coeur*; they are moral and religious, not scientific, in nature. Now, the scientist, whether he is in the human or the natural sciences, need not be bothered by this. He can always say that “more research is needed.” The political actor cannot wait for the ever-receding conclusions of research; he is constrained to act now, and that means to act in a state of considerable ignorance. To act politically is to take risks. At times these risks are awesome.

The empirical risk, of course, is grounded in what, following Weber, could be called the Iron Law of Unintended Consequence. We can try to assess and foresee the consequences of our political actions. But any such assessment remains a probabilistic one. Ever again the consequences of our actions escape us and return to haunt us. The moral risk is that we will be responsible for the evil and the suffering that may be the costs of our actions. As the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Romans: “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” Paul did not have politics in mind, but the passage is singularly applicable to the sphere of political action. Put in secular terms: one cannot act politically without getting one’s hands dirty—and sometimes, alas, one cannot act politically without getting blood on one’s boots. This, if you will, is another Iron Law. Unless one deliberately closes one’s eyes to this reality, there are, I think, only two existential postures in which one can come to terms with it. The first is religious; Paul’s understanding of justification by faith is a centrally important Christian version of this. The second is stoical—the fully aware shouldering of the burden of unintended evil that is part of the human condition. That, incidentally, was Max Weber’s choice, an acceptance of tragedy bordering on the heroic. (Weber was once asked, “If this is what you think, why do you go on doing sociology?” He replied, “I want to see how much I can stand.”) I have immense respect for this kind of stoicism, but, my own response to this existential dilemma is religious; indeed it is Pauline.

The social sciences teach us a particular version of the “art of mistrust.” By the same token, they are intrinsically antiutopian. Especially sociology has, from its beginnings, been marked by a debunking spirit—looking beneath and behind the facades of social life, dragging dirty secrets out into the open (as, for instance, all the dirty secrets of class), unmasking the vested interests lurking behind lofty rhetoric—if you will, a certifiably subversive enterprise. It is ironic that so many sociologists, inveterate skeptics

when it comes to the present, have been mistily credulous about the future. It seems to me that sociological skepticism must apply not only to the status quo but to any political agenda purporting to replace the status quo. This applies with particular urgency to the two great utopian fantasies of the modern era, the myth of progress and the myth of revolution.

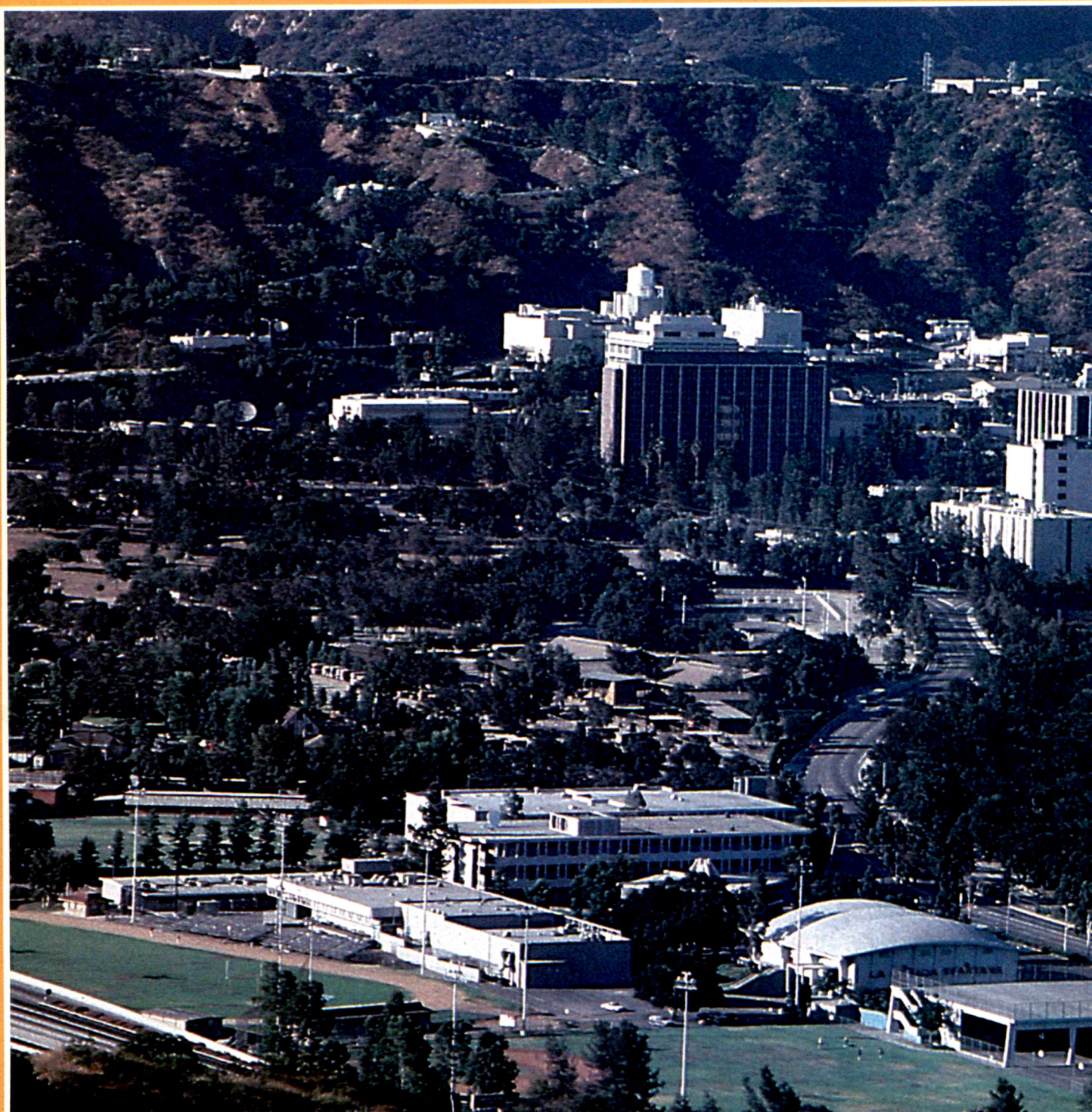
Milton Friedman, the University of Chicago economist, is credited with the statement that the most important lesson of economics is that there are no free lunches. Not only of economics: the application of all social-science perspectives to the realm of moral judgment and political action yields the same lesson. It is the easiest thing in the world to proclaim a good. The hard part is to think through ways by which this good can be realized without exorbitant costs and without consequences that negate the good. That is why an ethic of responsibility must be cautious, calculating a perennially uncertain mass of means, costs and consequences. This is tedious and endlessly frustrating, which is why so many people, especially young people, are drawn to an ethic of attitude: *moral purity is one of the cheapest human achievements*.

With all this skepticism and all this cautiousness, will one not inevitably end up doing nothing at all? And, in consequence, abandon the political arena to the crooks and the fanatics who have no such fine scruples? My answer, emphatically and passionately, is: No! By no means! There is no reason why caution should lead to inaction. If that were true, none of us would ever trust ourselves in the hands of a surgeon. I believe that the vocation of political action requires no less responsibility than that of surgery. And in both vocations a core norm should be that portion of the Hippocratic Oath that enjoins the physician above all not to do greater harm.



**THE JET PROPULSION LABORATORY** in Pasadena, California, may seem an odd contender for the title of America's premier space-science center. No spacecraft are launched there, and the lab plays only a small role in the manned U.S. space flights that have captured the world's imagination. JPL's primary mission is to design and control

# JPL PROBING OUTER SPACE





JPL

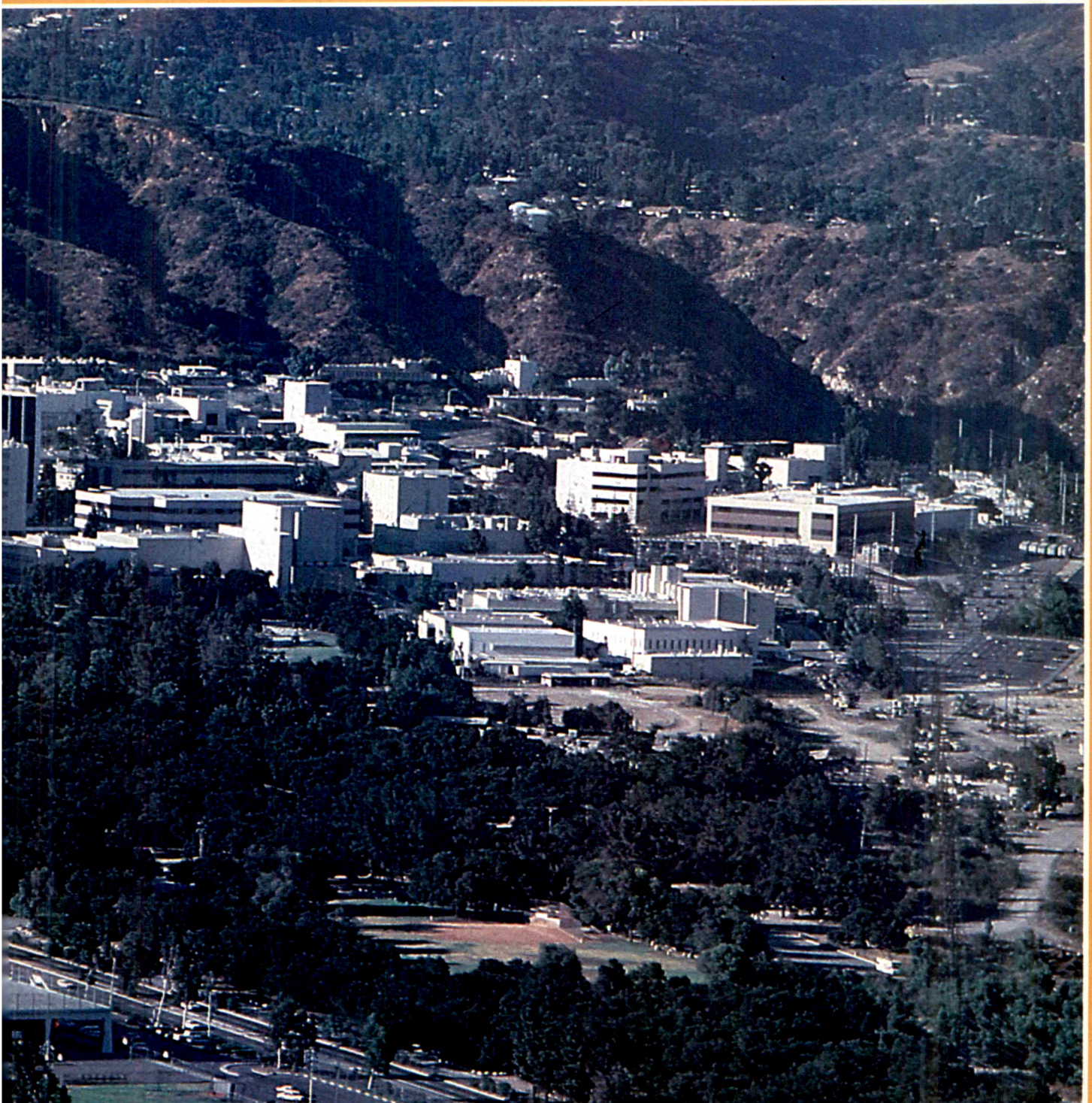


sophisticated unmanned spacecraft. Yet through this sort of quiet, cumulative exploration the scientists and engineers at JPL are transforming mankind's understanding of the solar system.

The lab began in 1936 as an informal research project in rocketry run by a few scientists and students at the California Institute of Technology, and even today JPL remains a division of Caltech, the only National Aeronautics and Space Administration facility that is



*The JPL campus sprawls at the base of California's San Gabriel Mountains. Left, the 1975 Viking launch; destination: Mars.*





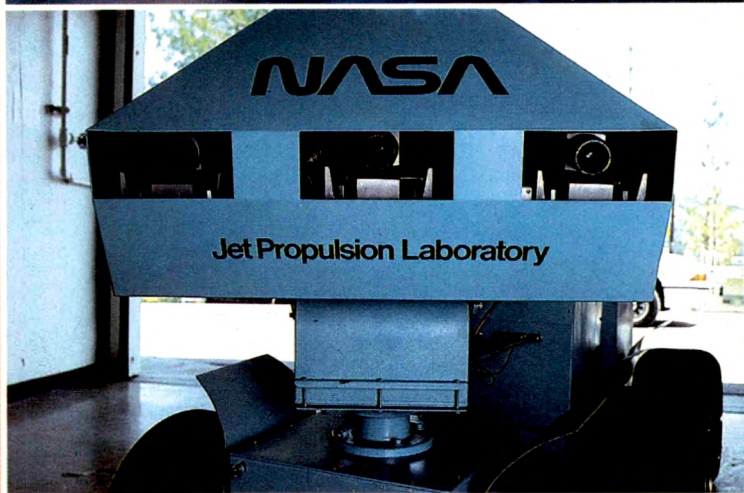
part of a university. Over the years JPL-built space probes have sent back reams of data, much of it with unexpected implications for scientists. In 1958 America's first orbiting satellite, *Explorer 1*, discovered bands of radiation that encircle the Earth. In 1962 the first planetary probe, *Mariner 2*, passed near Venus and revealed that Earth's nearest neighbor has a surface temperature of over 400 degrees centigrade. In 1964 cameras aboard JPL's *Ranger 7* transmitted pictures of the moon, close-ups with 2000 times the resolution of the best Earth-based telescopes. That same year *Mariner 4* began its eight-month journey to Mars, a project that provided images of a desert planet locked in an ice age. A decade later instruments aboard the Viking soft-landers analyzed samples of Martian soil, offering insights into whether life could exist there.

If the thinkers and tinkerers at JPL had to choose one project to represent their work, however, they would probably agree on the Voyager mission. In 1977 two Voyager spacecraft were launched toward Jupiter and Saturn, 628 and 1276 million kilometers from the Earth. Reaching Jupiter in 1979 and Saturn in 1980, the Voyagers made many major discoveries; they found unknown moons and the first active volcanoes outside Earth. Eight years after completing their original mission, the Voyagers continue to forge through space, transmitting information that has increased our knowledge of the planets a thousand-fold. Now, as *Voyager 1* approaches the edge of the solar system, *Voyager 2*, reprogrammed by JPL navigators to fly past Uranus in 1986, speeds on to Neptune later this year, on course to be the first spacecraft ever to reach that planet.

## The 1990s and Beyond

Using information gathered by Voyager and other missions, scientists have set specific goals for the next great wave of space explorations. *Magellan*, launched by the space shuttle, will undertake a single task: creating a high-resolution radar map of the surface of Venus. Late in 1989 *Galileo* will set sail for Jupiter on an indirect course that allows the spacecraft to "steal" energy from the gravity fields of Venus and Earth to accelerate its journey deep into space, a technique pioneered by *Voyager 2*. *Galileo*'s orbiter and soft-landing probe will transmit data to more than 100 space researchers from six nations. Under study for the future is an unmanned rover that could collect samples from the surface of Mars and return them to Earth.

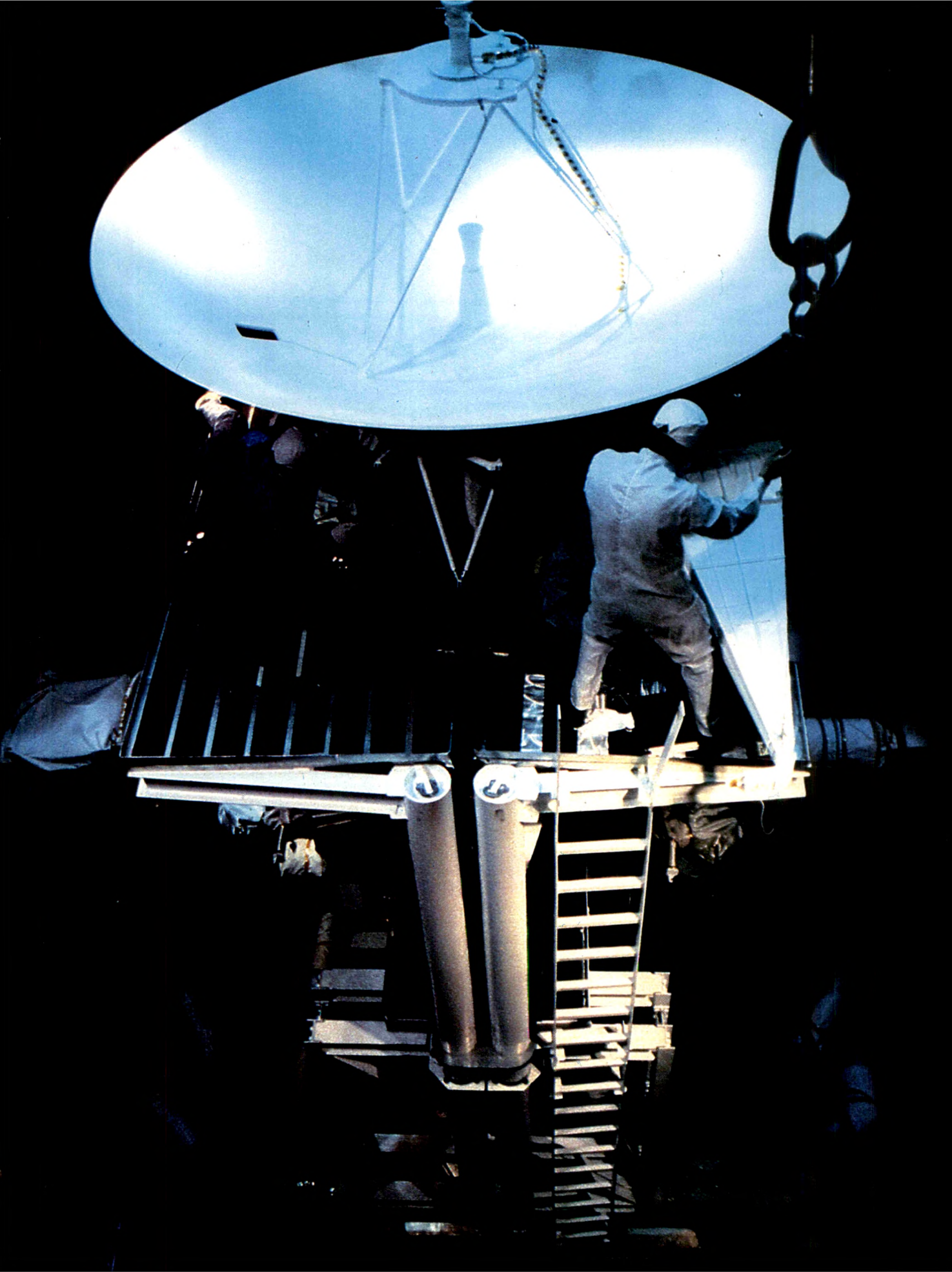
JPL



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Right, *Magellan*'s 3.5-meter antenna dish will provide detailed images of cloud-shrouded Venus that may yield insights into the Earth's evolution. Top, artist's conception of the *Galileo* orbiter-lander as it will appear en route to Jupiter. Above, a prototype of the robotic Mars rover, modeled on the lunar rover.





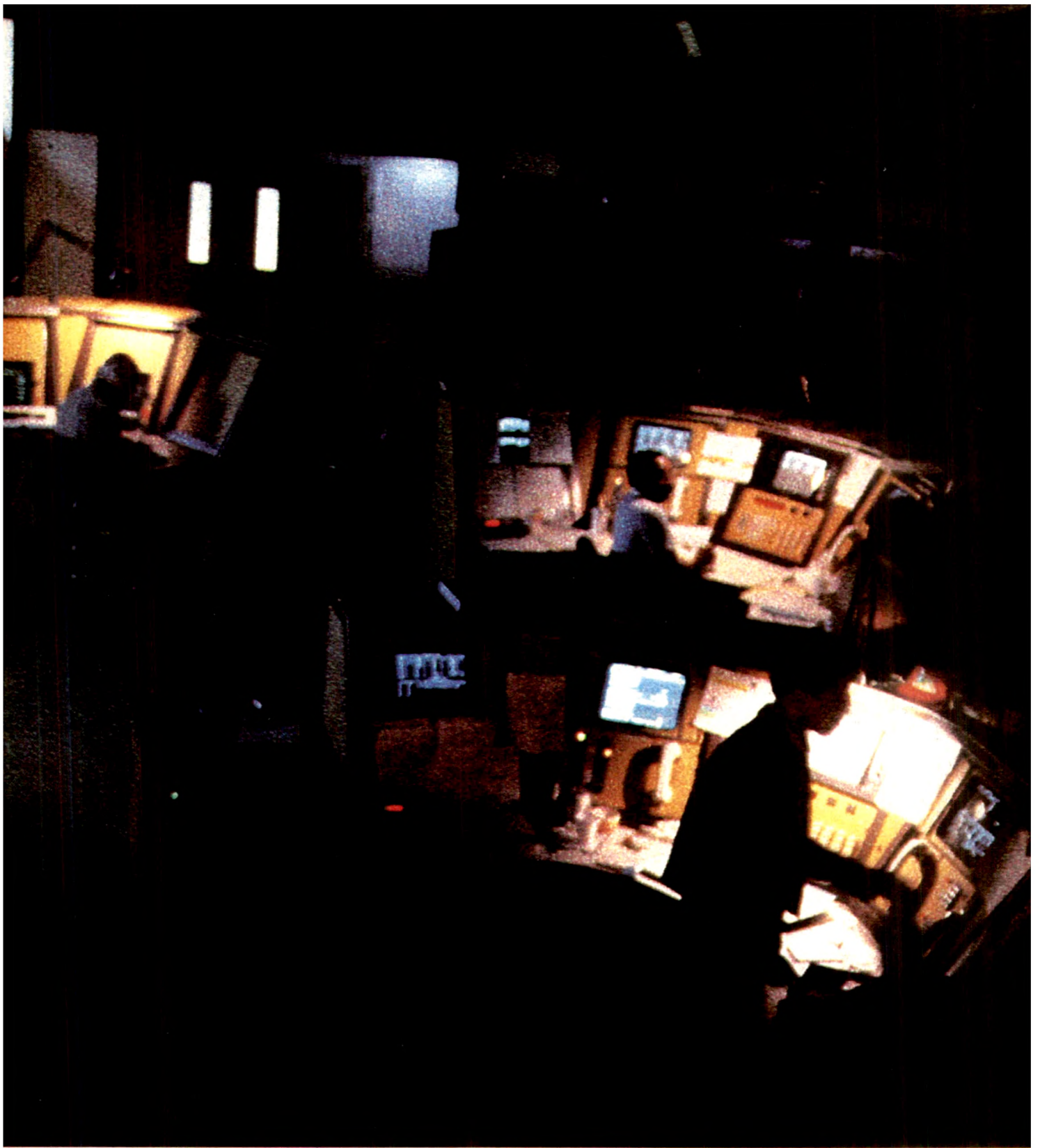




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◆  
*The Deep Space Network center  
at JPL headquarters is the communications link  
between scientists and spacecraft. As  
Voyager 2 approaches Neptune, data will  
pour in to DSN computers,  
and staff members will be reluctant to leave  
the video displays, even to sleep.*





## Deep Space Network

A system of antennas, receivers and transmitters called the Deep Space Network tracks JPL's missions. Through the DSN, scientists can alter the course of a spacecraft, direct instruments toward interesting phenomena, gather chemical and meteorological data, or record images of space never before seen by man. To communicate with *Voyager 2* during its flight past Neptune, engi-

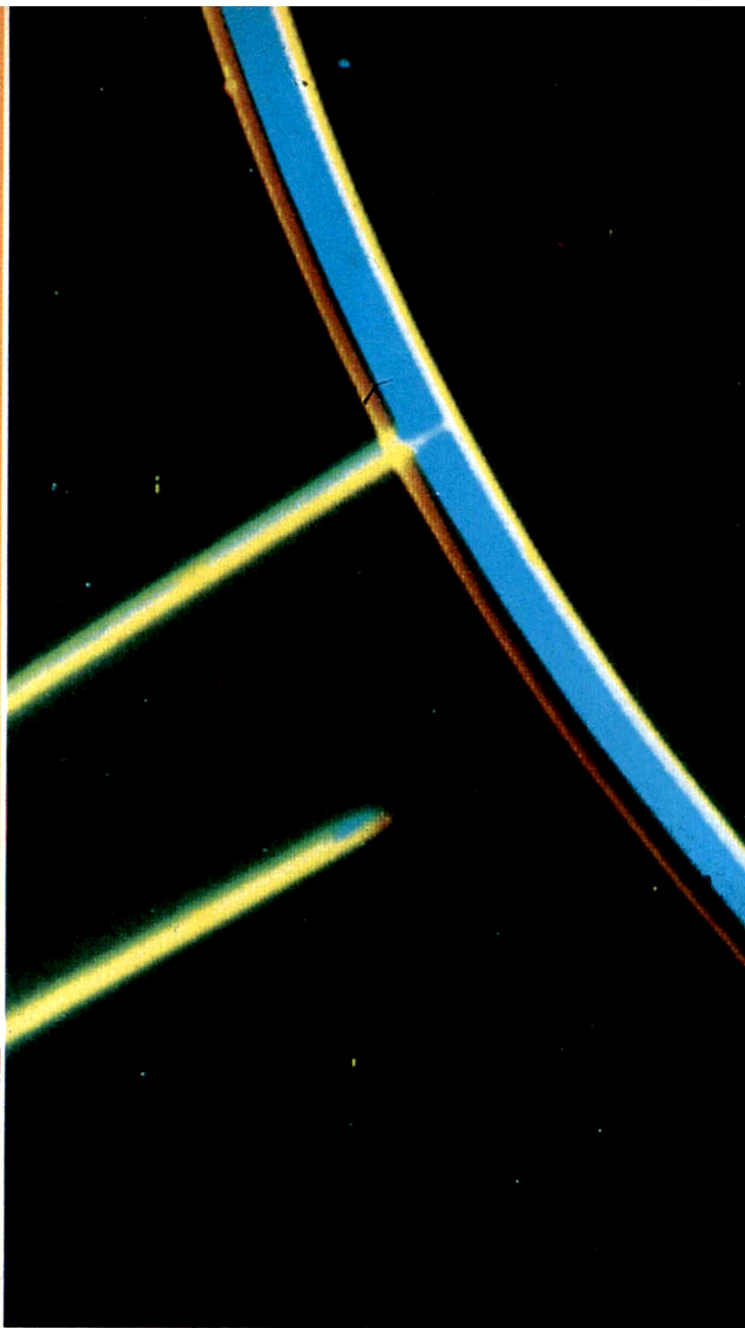
neers at the DSN facility in Goldstone, California, must pick up the signal from a tiny transmitter 4500 million kilometers from Earth, aiming their 64-meter antenna dish within a range of two centimeters. DSN stations in California, Spain and Australia conduct radio experiments as well: as part of the international Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence project, these stations are carrying out an all-sky survey of radio waves, hoping to stumble on some sign of distant civilization.



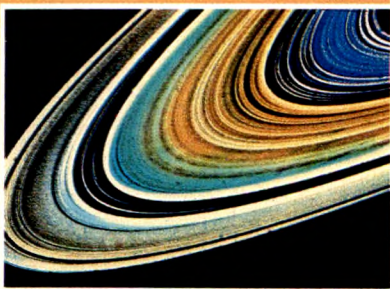
## Computerized Image Processing

Even before *Ranger 7* transmitted pictures of the moon 25 years ago, researchers at JPL had begun to develop computer technology to heighten resolution and correct distortion in the first, blurred images from space. Today pictures from state-of-the-art television cameras aboard satellites and space probes pass through special filters and are digitized—or broken down into number values for color and brightness—before being transmitted to Earth. There, computers re-create the images element by element on video monitors. Scientists at JPL realized early in their work that image enhancement had applications to medicine as well. The lab's Life Sciences Biomedical Program has used image processing to study coronary-artery disease, diagnose cancers and evaluate tissue damage in burn victims. New tools to explore the inner space of the human body are among the most important dividends of the U.S. space program.

JPL



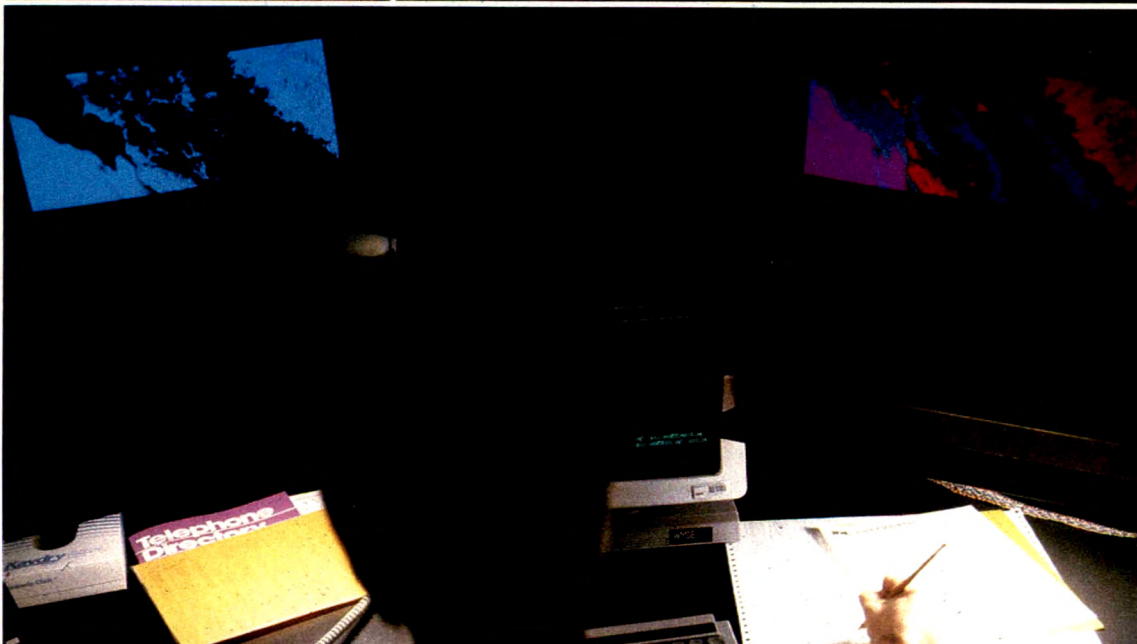
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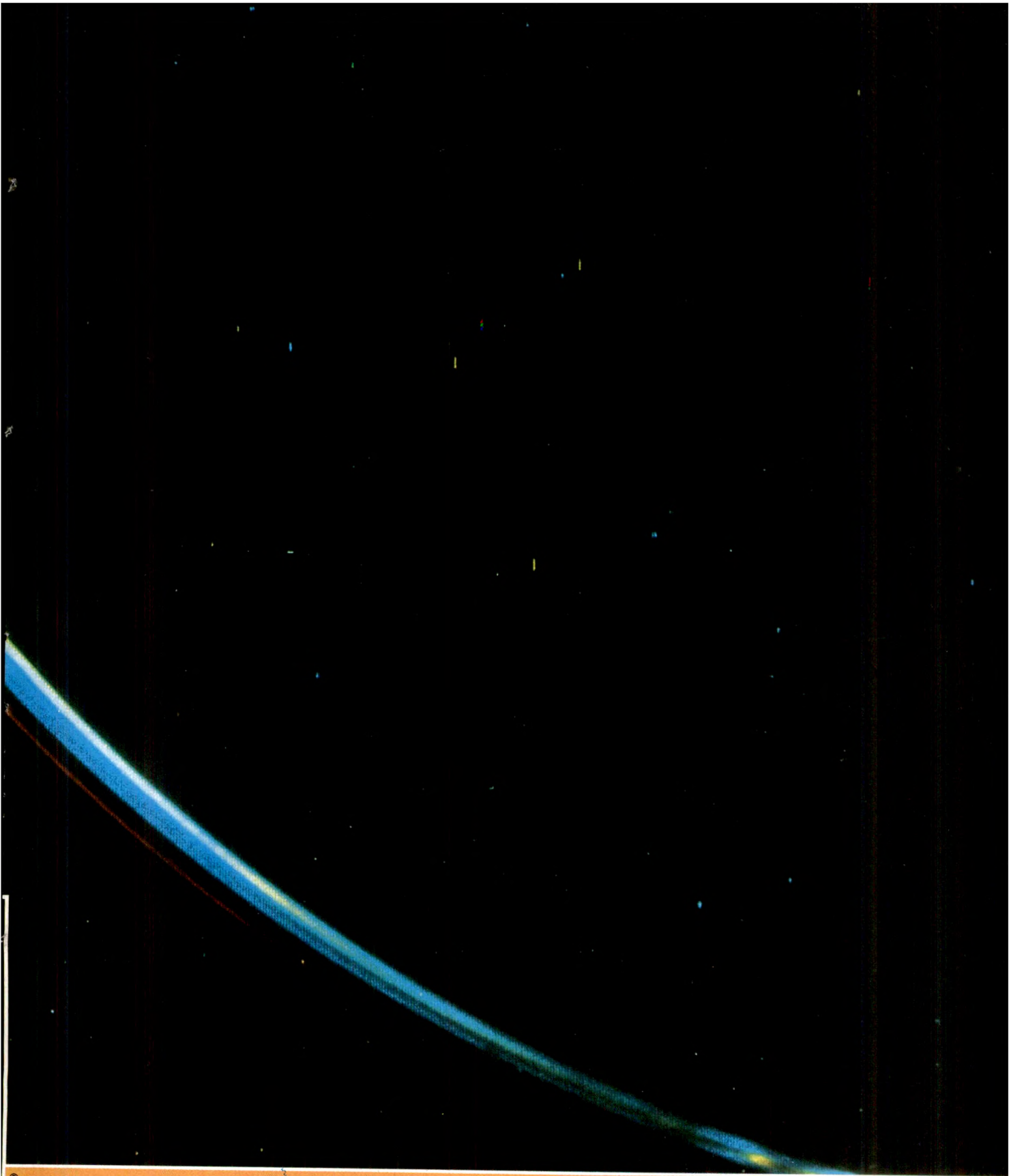
Far right, Jupiter's ring illuminated by sunlight coming from behind the planet. Top,

Saturn's rings, photographed by Voyager; colors do not represent light that the human eye would see, but rather have been created by computer to show differences in chemical composition.

Bottom, a technician processes satellite images of the San Francisco Bay area line by line on JPL computer monitors.









# THE GENIUS





# OF IRVING BERLIN

By Josh Rubins

A critical analysis of the great popular composer on the occasion of his 100th birthday.

*One of the most renowned popular composers, Jerome Kern, once said, "Irving Berlin has no place in American music. He is American music." A cursory listing of some of Berlin's hits—among the more than 1600 songs he composed are "Alexander's Ragtime Band," "There's No Business Like Show Business" and "White Christmas"—attests to his talent in writing melodies and lyrics permanently etched in memory. Yet it is not just Berlin's sheer popularity that accounts for his place in American culture. More than any other artist, Berlin transformed the songwriter—the popular tunesmith—into a serious composer by*

*writing sophisticated songs that evoke a welter of emotions and often reveal a social conscience. After Irving Berlin, in the words of one musician, "'light' music was not to be taken lightly." In this essay written in honor of Berlin's 100th birthday, book critic and composer Josh Rubins explores the exact nature of this self-taught musical genius and why his songs are so enduring.*

*Josh Rubins was awarded the National Book Critics Circle's 1987 citation for excellence in book reviewing. He also is the lyricist and cocreator of the 1988 musical Brownstone.*

the first half of the 20th century.

For Berlin, admittedly, the 1988 celebration was largely a case of déjà vu. He first found himself famous more than 75 years ago, in 1911, when "Alexander's Ragtime Band"—a virtually unsyncopated march, far less similar to the works of Scott Joplin than a dozen earlier ragtime songs (including several by Berlin himself)—triggered a worldwide "ragtime" craze. The 23-year-old songwriter, an uninhibited eclectic from the start, had managed to distill a simplified, strutting pulse from the rhythms of urban black music, combining it with just enough harmonic sophistication to challenge and stimulate, but not alienate, a mass audience.

Two world wars later, as the source of such ubiquitous anthems as "White Christmas," "God Bless America," "Easter Parade" and "There's No Business Like Show Business," Berlin came to be regarded as an institution: a totem of patriotic values, a folk hero of sorts. And, in every decade since, there have been reverential salutes to the longevity of both the songs and the man. The week of the 100th birthday itself predictably elicited the most extravagant testimonials thus far. Journalists and broadcasters echoed each other in invoking the same phrases: "America's songwriter laureate," "Mr. American Music," "genius," "beloved," "legendary."

Yet, despite this adulation (or, to some degree, because of it), Berlin's work—especially its musical component—remains undervalued, only half-appreciated. For many urbane listeners, his name immediately, if somewhat misleadingly, calls up an off-putting knot of associa-

**I**t seems appropriate, if highly ironic, that a year celebrating George Gershwin—a new biography, concerts, recordings—dovetailed into a year of tributes to Irving Berlin. Much of the irony, of course, lies in the lopsided juxtaposition of these "contemporaries," born only 10 years apart. While 1987 marked the 50th anniversary of Gershwin's death at age 38, the 1988 festivities honored a living composer on his 100th birthday. (Berlin was born in Temun, Russia, on May 11, 1888, and came to America with his family in 1892.) Some whimsical Olympian dispenser of talent and life-spans appears to have played a dark prank on musical history.

In creative territory, too, the forever-young composer and the grand old songwriter make a strange yet ineluctable couple, more complementary, even polar, than twinlike.

Gershwin, often in inspired collaboration with his brother Ira, reached from the theater song "up"—as cultural convention would have it—to concert works, operetta and opera. Berlin, writing both music and words, stuck with the broader, downtown segment of musical life in America, the world of player pianos and dance bands and jukeboxes; in this realm the theater song (or its film-musical equivalent) was the upper limit of "seriousness" and the 32-bar melody was the basic form, continually reexamined yet rarely expanded. Jerome Kern and Richard Rodgers created more ambitious and ravishing specimens of the romantic ballad and, in Broadway collaborations, made bolder contributions to the evolution of musical theater; much of the jazz and blues of Duke Ellington and Harold Arlen has greater depth. But, between them, more than any others, Gershwin and Berlin embody the remarkable range of distinctive American composition in

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tions: simplistic refrains, conservative or jingoistic sentiments, popularity with (in Berlin's own ironic words) "the mob." Such an impression would certainly have been reinforced by most of those centenary paeans. Similarly, musicologists—including the few who no longer treat Gershwin with condescension—have shown little inclination to take bar-by-bar interest in scores by Irving Berlin.

That academics would have a problem with Berlin is not surprising. He presents that baffling phenomenon: the thoroughly illiterate yet cultivated master who is impossible to dismiss as a "primitive" or "folk artist." From a far poorer family than Gershwin, Berlin quit school at eight to sell newspapers and wait on tables (his father, a part-time cantor, had died). He never learned to read or write music. His by-ear piano playing—only in the key of F#, which keeps the fingers almost exclusively on the black keys—was energetic, 10-fingered, but rudimentary. He took a rigorously practical approach to the songwriting profession, shunning any "artistic" pretensions and cheerfully acknowledging his apparent technical limitations.

In *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Berlin—though identified as "perhaps the most versatile and successful American popular songwriter of the 20th century"—receives barely two columns, with a single paragraph of appraisal. The few attempts at a Berlin biography, beginning with Alexander Woollcott's 1925 *The Story of Irving Berlin*, have resulted in ragged personality sketches, devoid of critical ambition or musicological credibility.

Fortunately, however, the true dimensions of Berlin's achievement have been kept in view by some of his most erudite colleagues. Stravinsky, who used the word *genius* far less casually than television newswriters do, applied it to Berlin. The composer and music critic Virgil Thomson wrote in 1947 that there are not "five American 'art composers' who can be compared, as songwriters, for either technical skill or artistic responsibility, with Irving Berlin." Violinist Isaac Stern, in truncated interviews during the

100th-birthday celebration, suggested how Berlin's long-lined melodies recall Mozart's and Schubert's. And, in a less subjective vein, the impeccably trained arrangers and orchestrators who took "musical dictation" from Berlin testify that he never merely sang them a tune. All the harmonies, and often voicing of those harmonies (the far subtler question of which notes in a chord are played high, low or in a middle position), were clearly formed in Berlin's mind—even if he could not himself transcribe or fully play the precise chord sequences he heard in some inner ear.

In a landmark 1972 study, *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950*, Alec Wilder, taking a scholarly yet unpedantic approach to the history of popular music, offered a fairly persuasive assessment of Berlin as "the best all-around, overall songwriter America has ever had." Wilder pronounced himself to be "frankly astounded" by the sophistication of many Berlin songs. He also concluded that the harmonic complexities involved were unquestionably the composer's own work: "It is very nearly impossible, upon hearing some of these melodies, to believe that every chord was not an integral part of the creation of the tune."

Why, then, is Berlin still under-rated by many sophisticated people? The platitudinous lyrics for songs like "God Bless America" and "The Girl That I Marry" are one reason. Another, as Wilder pointed out, is that the numbing familiarity of a few Berlin songs has made it easy to overlook their quality. From even the most knowledgeable listeners, for example, "White Christmas" is more likely to summon up a blur of emotional responses, sentimental or cynical, than an appreciation of the bold chromaticism in its brooding opening phrase. In fact, though customarily embraced—or dismissed—as treacle, "White Christmas" captures, with remarkable economy and restraint, the thick mixture of moods stirred up by the Christmas and New Year holidays: nostalgia, anxiety, tenderness, depression. The melody, after several attempts to extract itself

from that darkly chromatic rumination, does eventually make its way to the open-heartedness suggested by wider intervals (the gentle ascent on "merry and bright," the near-octave dip on "Christmases"); in the lyric, too, the singer moves from introspection to feelings of fellowship.

These textures were undoubtedly inspired, in part, by the specific circumstances of the song's creation, for the film *Holiday Inn*, in 1942: the warmth of Bing Crosby's lower register, the long-distance separations and heightened apprehensions of wartime. But, for innumerable singers and succeeding generations, the song's layers and subtleties continue to generate un-mawkish sentiment (a Berlin trademark)—and help to explain, as does the tune's beauty, why "White Christmas" has survived incessant bland or inane performances, and guilt by association.

On the other hand, "A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody"—one of Berlin-the-composer's best things—has been seriously damaged by overexposure and insensitive handling, though some might put the blame in this case on Berlin-the-lyricist. The consummate professional, always ready to write for occasion or function, Berlin sometimes lavished melodic and harmonic refinement on banal verse or trivial subject matter. (The music of "Easter Parade" was originally used for a song called "Smile and Show Your Dimple.") "A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody" was a commission for the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1919*, the 13th edition of the annual revue—which always featured a procession of whimsically costumed beauties, serenaded by a preening tenor.

Within the limitations of the *Follies* format and sensibility, the lyric for the song's chorus is spare and elegant: "Just like the strain/ Of a haunting refrain/ She'll start upon a marathon/ And run around your brain." But quickly identified as the paradigm of "girlie revue" tunes, "A Pretty Girl" was seized upon as the perfect musical accompaniment for every beauty pageant, fashion show and striptease artist. After decades of coarse performance, the melody became known almost exclusively in exaggerated versions.



But the music itself—cleared (to whatever extent possible) of 70 years of sociocultural encrustation—remains fresh. Like so many other Berlin songs, “A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody” avoids the predictable structure, known to songwriters as “AABA,” that would by the mid-1920s become the genre’s most conventional form. The song presents a continuous stream of new musical ideas, with only a single repeat of a six-bar section. It combines, like the best of early Kern, European lushness with American jauntiness, a grand arc of melody energized by the irreverent bounce of a few eighth notes that arrive, unexpectedly, on the downbeat. Paradoxically, the alluring nature of this music (which foreshadows, among others, Gershwin’s “A Foggy Day”) is both the reason it has become overfamiliar—while dozens of lesser *Follies* parade themes are long forgotten—and the reason it deserves to be heard anew.

Other immediately well-known Berlin “standards” also tend to be only partially, or superficially, known. Nearly everyone can bring to mind the childlike initial phrases of “Always”: “I’ll be loving you,/ Always,/ With a love that’s true,/ Always.” The music, too, in these first eight bars, is melodically and harmonically plain. But of those who are roughly familiar with “Always,” few would be able to sing or hum on through the remainder of the song, which is anything but commonplace. While the singer continues to pledge undying devotion in the subsequent 24 bars, in the most prosaic and untroubled words imaginable, the music tells another story. Disturbing modulations take the melody on a precarious journey; the song briefly threatens to leave its original key entirely, straying too far ever to return. Finally, when those bone-simple opening chords regain control, they have a different, less cozy quality because of what has preceded them.

This degree of harmonic daring was unprecedented in the Tin Pan Alley of 1925, and the fact that “Always” was also a huge commercial success encouraged others, Kern especially, to expand the musical

*Berlin was an adventurer who could do virtually anything he tried. His openness to every kind of music in the air and on the street, especially black music, has made him the mainstream’s greatest pioneer.*



vocabulary of the popular song. Also influential, on a much less obvious level, was the song’s suggestion of psychological complexity. The contrast between the complacent, blindly optimistic lyric and the restless, spasmodic music conveys an undercurrent of anxiety, a dislocation between what is said or thought and what is felt—perhaps unconsciously.

Indeed, the unique capacity of the song as a form to work on two distinct levels simultaneously is what probably explains the endurance of more than a few seemingly “uninteresting” Berlin chestnuts. “All By Myself” (1921) reverses the layers: an unrelievedly woebegone lyric is redeemed by musical charm and pluck; the self-pity is slyly aerated by a buoyant melody that eschews every sad-song mannerism. “Blue Skies” (1926) takes the subtextual shading of “Always” even further. The words assert total contentment with near-fatuous certainty:

*Blue skies  
Smiling at me  
Nothing but blue skies  
Do I see.*

The music, however, clings to a mournful minor key, allowing only momentary glimpses of brightness to break, rather wanly, through the gloom. Then, when the song turns downright jubilant—“Never saw the sun shining so bright/ Never saw

things going so right”—the musical intensity builds as well: these eight bars, leaning heavily on the “blue note” effect, is Berlin at his most atypically lamentational and Hebraic.

Tension between words and music, rarely perceived by the listener as such yet subliminally forceful, can reflect the tangled nature, the ambivalence, of most human emotion. This internal discord, intended or not, may account for the remarkable vitality of “Blue Skies” (revived every 10 years or so, most recently by country singer Willie Nelson) and for the durability of such other mixed-message ballads as 1932’s “How Deep Is the Ocean?” (favored by jazz artists, memorably recorded by Ray Charles and Sarah Vaughan). Moreover, the joyous/mournful texture of “Always” and “Blue Skies” presages the similarly layered ambivalence of the very greatest ballads of the 1930s: the Gershwins’ “Love Is Here To Stay,” Kern and Hammerstein’s “All the Things You Are” and Rodgers and Hart’s “My Funny Valentine.”

The excessive familiarity of all these plain-spoken ballads—others include “Marie,” “Say It Isn’t So,” “They Say It’s Wonderful”—has damaged Berlin’s reputation in another way as well. The “old favorites” have distracted attention from the unparalleled range of the entire Berlin catalog. In the very early 1920s, before Gershwin’s “Fascinating Rhythm” from *Lady, Be Good!* (1924) definitively captured the jagged, nervy essence of citified jazz. Berlin—a veteran popularizer of tricky dance patterns—was experimenting with the irregular accents that give the Gershwin tune much of its novelty.

Berlin’s masterpiece in this manner, “Puttin’ On the Ritz” (1929), remains an unnerving provocation, wonderfully subversive in its metrical eccentricity—thanks, in part, to that uneven collaborator, Berlin-the-lyricist. The words here underline the



unpredictable stresses in the music with witty insolence:

If you're blue and  
You don't know where to  
Go to why don't you  
Go....

The rhymes are placed precisely where they will jangle rather than fall comfortably into alignment. The ear wants desperately to match the stressed "blue" with one of those unstressed "to"s: the frustration is part of the dazzle.

That Berlin began to come into his own as a stylish lyricist with "Puttin' On the Ritz" has a certain rightness about it—because it was recorded by Fred Astaire, who would give the number its definitive performance in the 1946 film *Blue Skies*. Astaire had been a fan of Berlin material since his vaudeville years. By 1935 Astaire, teamed with Ginger Rogers, was not only a dancing film star and a remarkable singer but also the celebrated epitome of down-to-earth cosmopolitanism and relaxed elegance. Inspired by Astaire, Berlin produced—for three Fred-and-Ginger movies—sleeker, worldlier songs, informed by the music in Astaire's background, yet vigorously original nevertheless.

"Cheek to Cheek," from *Top Hat* (1935), is probably the longest hit tune Berlin ever wrote, 72 bars of AABA (plus the tiny, surprising interlude that begins "Dance with me!"), rather than his customary, old-fashioned 32. The way that each stanza starts off, as if in mid-thought, is lightly ironic, pure Astaire. The romantic exuberance that was flatly proclaimed in the early Berlin ballads has now become hesitant, a murmur that gently expands while the melody climbs up, little by little, through a full octave:

Heaven,  
I'm in heaven,  
And my heart beats so that  
I can hardly speak,  
And I seem to find  
The happiness I seek  
When we're out together dancing  
Cheek to cheek.

Even after many hearings, most listeners are unaware of any technical devices at work in the "Cheek to Cheek" lyric; they notice only that the words glide by effortlessly, with a

sense of inevitability, and provide almost tactile pleasure for those doing the singing. On close examination, however, one finds that Berlin is nearly always manipulating (perhaps more intuitively than consciously) alliteration and assonance, and has threaded this stanza with just the right number of "h" words, "s" words, and "ee" sounds ("beats," "speak," "seem," etc.) to create an irresistible momentum, both fluid and percussive.

The fatalistic, doom-shadowed "Let's Face the Music and Dance" may be the most impressive Berlin/Astaire song of all. The unique structure involves a suspenseful variation on the AABA form, with an odd-sized basic unit—an "A" section of 14 bars, not the customary eight or 16—that keeps the listener on edge. Furthermore, when the opening section is repeated, it departs from the original tune for six rebellious bars: the music suddenly rises in pitch and grabs at distant harmonies, giving in to anxiety, before it settles back down into its initial groove. The ambivalence here, unlike that in "Always" or "Blue Skies," is clearly premeditated, with a singer who keeps reaching for C major but always finds himself sliding back into C minor.

Still, though Berlin was much more versatile than his detractors realize, his work has distinct limitations. As a ballad lyricist, Berlin seemed to know a good deal about loss and devotion but very little about rejection, guilt or lifelong insecurity; Lorenz Hart, Cole Porter and Johnny Mercer (when writing with Harold Arlen) brought to the torch song a smoky tinge of after-hours regret, of been-around-the-block wisdom, that must have been alien to the creator of "Always." As a writer of comedy, Berlin could be broad or dry but never sardonic or brittle or daring. For better or worse, he wrote what was called for, with few imperatives of his own.

As a composer, on the other hand, Berlin was an adventurer who could do virtually anything he tried, occasionally taking his native brilliance on excursions shared by none of his contemporaries. (Despite extensive study of counterpoint, for instance, neither Kern nor Gershwin could concoct a "double" number—two independent melodies sung at once—with the cap-

tivating vigor and wondrous interplay of "You're Just in Love" or "Play a Simple Melody.") Berlin's openness to every kind of music in the air and on the street, especially black music, made him the mainstream's greatest pioneer. So when asked to write for Ethel Waters, in *As Thousands Cheer* (1933), he wrote not only "Heat Wave" and "Harlem on My Mind" but also "Supper Time":

Supper time—  
I should set the table  
'Cause it's supper time.  
Somehow I'm not able  
'Cause that man of mine  
Ain't comin' home no more.

This is the lament of a woman whose husband has been lynched, whose children don't yet know that their father is dead. Its dramatic music foreshadows *Porgy and Bess*. It also looks ahead to the overwhelming influence that gospel music and rhythm-and-blues would have on ballad writing in the century's second half.

Throughout the most active decades of his career, in fact, Berlin kept reinventing himself. Part chameleon and part lone wolf, he managed to inhale virtually everything around him—a star performer's personality, a public sentiment, the latest catchphrase or dance step—and expel it as pure Berlin air. The "signature tunes" he fashioned for Astaire, Bing Crosby, Al Jolson, Ethel Waters and Ethel Merman retain the songwriter's own stamp as well. But most of Berlin's songs were intended—unabashedly, with none of the misgivings of a self-conscious composer "going commercial"—as signature tunes for average Americans in their better-than-average moments: the inarticulate wooer's charm in "It's a Lovely Day Today," the unforced enthusiasm of "I Love a Piano," the way that "White Christmas" (with its shifting interplay of yearning and reserve) rises above the maudlin. Thickly disguised as the "most successful songwriter" in history, or as a jukebox composite of national virtues, Berlin the dogged innovator and complex artist quietly tagged along, a genius without tears. ♦



# FERMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Americans are engaged in a wide-ranging debate over an age-old question: what does it mean to be an educated person? A controversial book on the subject—*The Closing of the American Mind* by Allan Bloom [see excerpt in *Dialogue* 80]—has enjoyed unexpected success, in Europe as well as the United States, and has brought the debate into the public sphere. Bloom faults the culture of “openness,” which has prevailed in universities since World War II, for making all values seem relative. Other critics, supporting Bloom, decry the loss of a common cultural heritage. Contrary views come from a diverse group of literary scholars—feminists, advocates of minority literature, deconstructionists and leftists of various kinds who question the very possibility of such a heritage. For them the concept of a few “Great Books,” the *canon*, is shaky since judgments of literary merit are inevitably determined by ruling elites within a given society.

This debate crystallized around the revisions in the Western Culture Program at Stanford University in California. The Stanford program required that all first-year students complete readings from a standard list of classics of Western thought. After two years of discussion and study, however, the Stanford faculty senate adopted a new core course to replace “Western Culture.” This program, “Culture, Ideas and Values,” retains six sources from the original list—the Bible, Plato, St. Augustine, Machiavelli, Rousseau and Marx—but it will also include the study of at least one non-European culture and will devote “attention to issues of race, gender and class.”

Stanford’s decision has ignited an intense national controversy, neatly summed up by Carl Schorske, professor emeritus at Princeton University: “You can welcome this new educational strategy as enrichment, as an affirmation of the expansion of democracy into the sphere of culture, as the Stanford faculty has done. Or you can view it as a



betrayal of Western values.” U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett took the latter view, characterizing Stanford as “a great university brought low by the very forces which modern universities came into being to oppose—ignorance, irrationality and intimidation.” Conservative columnist George Will agreed with Bennett: “Stanford has taken a step on the downward path toward defining a university not as a transmitter of culture, but as an advocate of the politically ascendant agendas of the moment.” William Chace, professor of English and vice-provost for academic planning at Stanford, defended the decision: “This pedagogical step was taken on the basis of the recognition, hardly radical, that ‘issues of race, gender and class’ deeply affect the world in which we live and in which our forebears have lived. Others might wish to think that such matters make no difference to cultural formation, but they might find themselves mistaken.”

In the first article of this special section, writer and literary critic James Atlas examines the Stanford controversy and similar debates on other campuses. Through interviews with radical literary scholars, he explains why many reject the classical canon of literary masterpieces and challenge the idea of cultural authority. Philosopher Sidney Hook, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, follows with an attack on the Stanford decision and a defense of the traditional canon. In a third article, Stephen Graubard, a professor at Harvard and Brown universities since 1947, looks back on 40 years of teaching and suggests that the changes in what students are expected to read and know have not necessarily been changes for the worse. The last article of the special section is a photographic look at another side of the “ferment” on American university campuses—the architecturally exciting libraries that are challenging classical ideas about design as some students and professors challenge the classical books.





# The Battle of the Books

**While a new generation of scholars argue that the Great Books aren't the only books, traditionalists defend the classics.**

By James Atlas

*Ever since universities have existed there have been arguments about what books should be "taught" to the students. Conservative educators have usually believed in the idea of a canon of classics, an elite and exclusive club of "Great Books." Even the addition of Shakespeare to the club was, at one time, a radical innovation, and he was occasionally in danger of expulsion. (In 1814 Lord Byron wrote to a friend: "Shakespeare's name, you may depend on it, stands absurdly too high and will go down.") Some of the Great Books of a previous generation are not much read today. Indeed, the Harvard Classics, the famous "Five-Foot Shelf" of ancient and modern literature selected in 1908 by the president of Harvard University to "enrich, refine and fertilize" the mind, include a number of English and American novels that today seem quaint rather than timeless.*

*In this article, journalist and literary critic James Atlas draws a profile of the new generation of American scholars shaped by the intellectual trends of the 1960s. Many of the questions they raise in their work challenge the traditional literary canon and go to the very heart of critical theory: how do we know whether a book is "good" or not? Who decides and by what criteria? Other questions reflect more personal concerns and the changing demographics of a field suddenly open to women, minorities, the children of working-class parents: have places in the canon been reserved for white males?*

*Where are the women, the blacks, the writers of the Third World?*

*James Atlas, an editor of The New York Times Magazine, writes frequently on American literature. He is the author of Delmore Schwartz: The Life of an American Poet.*

The philosopher George Santayana was once asked which books young people should read. It didn't matter, he replied, as long as they read the same ones. Generations of English majors in American colleges followed his advice. You started with the Bible, moved briskly through Beowulf and Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton, the 18th-century novel, the romantics, a few big American books like *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby Dick*—and so on, masterpiece by masterpiece, century by century, until you'd read (or browsed through) the corpus.

Occasional disputes broke out; reputations flourished and declined. T.S. Eliot smuggled in the 17th-century metaphysical poets, the critic Malcolm Cowley promoted Faulkner, there was a Henry James revival. For the most part, though, the canon was closed: you were either on the syllabus or off the syllabus.

It was in the academic journals that I first noticed the word *canon*. Originally, it referred to those works that the church considered part of the Bible; now, apparently, it had a new meaning. PMLA, the journal of the Modern Language Association, proposed a future issue on "the idea

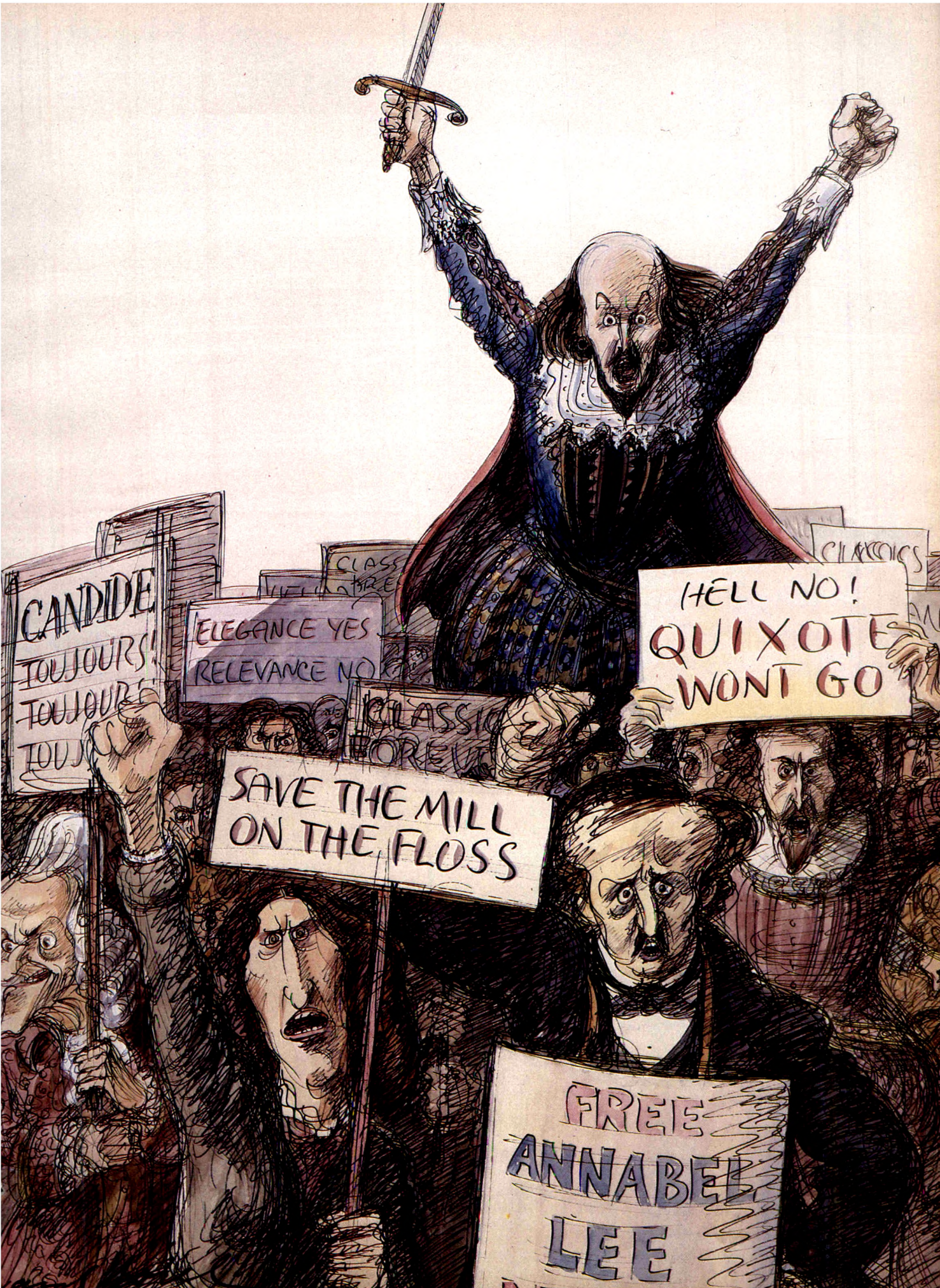
of the literary canon in relation to concepts of judgment, taste and value." This spring, the Princeton English department held a symposium on "Masterpieces: Canonizing the Literary."

*Canon formation, canon revision, canonicity*: the mysterious, often indecipherable language of critical theory had yielded up a whole new terminology. What was this canon? The books that constituted the intellectual heritage of educated Americans, that had officially been defined as great. The kind of books you read, say, in Columbia University's famed humanities course, virtually unchanged since 1937: Homer, Plato, Dante, Milton...the masterpieces of Western civilization.

In the academic world, I kept hearing, the canon was "a hot issue." "Everything these days has to do with the canon," one of my campus sources reported. Then, early in 1988, a flurry of articles appeared in the press. "From Western Lit to Westerns as Lit," joked *The Wall Street Journal* in a piece about some English professors down at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, who have been teaching works of popular culture like *The Godfather*—book and movie—Steven Spielberg's movie *E.T.* and the western novels of Louis L'Amour. An article in *The New York Times*, "U.S. Literature: Canon Under Siege," quoted a heretical brigade of academ-

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**GERALD GRAFF**  
Northwestern University

ics who were fed up with hierarchies of literary value.

Why should Melville and Emerson dominate the syllabus? argued renegade professors from Johns Hopkins and Northwestern universities, Queens College and the University of California, Berkeley. What about the black novelist Zora Neale Hurston, a hero of the Harlem Renaissance? What about Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of the 19th-century best-seller *Uncle Tom's Cabin*? "It's no different from choosing between a hoagie sandwich and a pizza," explained Houston Baker, a professor of literature at the University of Pennsylvania. (Did he mean that all literature, like all junk food, was essentially the same?)

By the end of March 1988, when Stanford University, in Palo Alto, California, announced plans to revise the series of Western-culture courses it required of freshmen, eliminating the core list of classics and substituting works by "women, minorities and persons of color," what began as an academic squabble had burgeoned into a full-blown Great Books Debate. Comparative-literature and humanities professors, Afro-American specialists, historians, college administrators and government spokesmen entered the fray. All over the country, editorials appeared decrying the sorry developments at Stanford.

Days after the new course was unveiled, William J. Bennett, then U.S. secretary of education, showed up in Palo Alto to deplore the university's decision. Speaking before an overflow crowd, Bennett expressed contempt for the faculty senate that had voted for the change.

"The West is the culture in which we live," Bennett asserted. "It has set the moral, political, economic and social standards for the rest of the world." By giving in to a vocal band of student radicals, "a great university was brought low by the very forces which modern universities came into being to oppose: ignorance, irrationality and intimidation."

Bennett's polemic ignored the fine print of the Stanford proposal. Instead of dealing with 15 "classic texts," students would read the Old and New Testaments as well as the works of five authors: Plato, St. Augustine, Machiavelli, Rousseau and Marx. The other works assigned would concentrate on "at least one non-European culture," with "substantial attention to issues of race, gender and class." No one was proposing to "junk Western culture," insisted Stanford's president, Donald Kennedy. The point was simply to reflect "the diversity of contemporary American culture and values."

Never mind. For Bennett, what happened at Stanford was another opportunity to rehearse one of his favorite themes: the decline of the West. In 1984, as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the federal agency that funds much scholarly research, he published a report titled "To Reclaim a Legacy," which decried the influence of the 1960s on higher education in America, working in the obligatory reference to Matthew Arnold's famous definition of culture as the best that has been thought and said.

The trouble with this "Matthew Arnold view of literature and culture," as Gerald Graff, a professor at Northwestern University and one of the more reasoned commentators on the debate, observes, is that there never was any consensus about the best that has been thought and said—or, for that matter, why the West should have a corner on the high-culture market. The idea of literature as a fixed and immutable canon—the Great Books, the Five-Foot Shelf—is a historical illusion. "Canon busting is nothing new," Graff says. "There have always been politics. Teaching Shakespeare instead of the classics was a radical innovation."

So why is this debate over the canon different from all other debates? The fierce arguments about socialist realism that raged among American intel-



lectuals in the 1930s and '40s were a lot more acrimonious. As for what's literature and what isn't, the critic Leslie Fiedler was anatomizing the cultural significance of Superman decades ago.

What's different is who's doing the debating. A new generation of scholars has emerged, a generation whose sensibilities were shaped by intellectual trends that originated in the 1960s: Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, a skepticism about the primacy of the West. For these scholars, the effort to widen the canon is an effort to define themselves, to validate their own identities. In the 1980s, literature is us.

On the shelves in Jane Tompkins's office at Duke University are rows of 19th-century novels; she is one of the few who read them now. Her book *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* is a brilliant exhumation of what she considers lost masterpieces, the history of a different American literature from the one I read in college in the 1960s.

Writers like Charles Brockden Brown, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Susan Warner still deserve an audience, Tompkins argues with considerable persuasiveness. If they're no longer read, it's because our values have changed. The way to read these books is from the vantage of the past. Only by reconstructing the culture in which they were written and the audience to whom they were addressed can we learn to appreciate their intrinsic worth and see them for what they are: "man-made, historically produced objects" whose reputations were created in their day by a powerful literary establishment. In other words, the Great Books aren't the only books.

Tompkins is one of the jewels in the crown of Duke's English department, which in the last few years has assembled a faculty that can now claim to rival any in the country. Attracted by generous salaries and a university willing to let them teach pretty much whatever interests them, the new recruits compose a formidable team: Frank Lentricchia, the author of *After*

*the New Criticism* and other works; Fredric Jameson, probably the foremost Marxist critic in the country; Barbara Herrnstein Smith, president of the Modern Language Association; and Tompkins's husband, Stanley Fish, chairman of the department.

Canon revision is in full swing down at Duke, where students lounge on the manicured quad of the campus and the magnolias blossom in the spring. In the Duke catalogue, the English department lists, besides the usual offerings in Chaucer and Shakespeare, courses in American popular culture; advertising and society; television, technology and culture.

Lentricchia teaches a course titled "Paranoia, Politics and Other Pleasures" that focuses on the works of contemporary novelists Joan Didion and Don DeLillo and those of the late French structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault. Tompkins, an avid reader of contemporary fiction—on a shelf in her office I spotted copies of the popular novels *Princess Daisy* and *Valley of the Dolls*—is teaching all kinds of things, from a course on American literature and culture in the 1850s to one called "Home on the Range: The Western in American Culture."

Tompkins talks about her work with a rhetorical intensity that reminded me of the fervent radicals I used to know in college. Like so many of those in the vanguard of the new canonical insurrection, she is a child of the 1960s and a dedicated feminist. In her book *Sensational Designs*, she recounts how she gradually became aware of herself as a woman working in a "male-dominated scholarly tradition that control[led] both the canon of American literature and the critical perspective that interprets the canon for society." The writers offered up as classics didn't speak to Tompkins; they didn't address her own experience.

"If you look at the names on Butler Library up at Columbia University, they're all white males. We wanted to talk about civil rights in the classroom, to prove that literature wasn't a sacred

icon above the heat and dust of conflict."

The English-literature syllabus, Tompkins and her colleagues on other campuses discovered, was a potential instrument of change. By the 1970s, Afro-American departments and women's-studies majors had been installed on college campuses across the land. Books on gender, race, ethnicity poured from the university presses. Seminars were offered in Native American literature, Hispanic literature, Asian-American literature. "It wasn't only women we'd neglected," says Marjorie Garber, director of English graduate studies at Harvard University. "It was the whole Third World."

The ideology behind these challenges to the canon is as unambiguous as the license plates on Frank Lentricchia's old car: GO LEFT. Pick up any recent academic journal and you'll find it packed with articles on "Maidens, Maps and Mines: The Reinvention of Patriarchy in Colonial South Africa" or "Dominance, Hegemony and the Modes of Minority Discourse." The critical vocabulary of the 1980s bristles with militant neologisms: *Eurocentrism*, *phallocentrism*, *logophallocentrism*. "This is not an intellectual agenda, it is a political agenda," Secretary of Education Bennett declared on the evening news the night after his Stanford speech.

Why should a revolutionary curricular struggle be happening at a time when radical politics in America is virtually extinct? Walk into any classroom and you'll find the answer. Enormous sociological changes have occurred in American universities over the last 20 years; the ethnic profile of both students and faculty has undergone a dramatic transformation.

There's a higher proportion of minorities in college than ever before. By the end of this century, Hispanic, black and Asian-American undergraduates at Stanford may well outnumber whites. Their professors, many of whom were on the barricades in the 1960s, are now up for tenure.

"It's a demographic phenomenon," Jane Tompkins says. "There are



**“I’m interested in social issues as they bear on literature, but what really interests me is the mainline stuff, like Faulkner.”**

**FRANK LENTRICCHIA**  
Duke University

women, Jews, Italians teaching literature in universities. The people who are teaching now don’t look the way professors used to look. Frank Lentricchia doesn’t look like Cleanth Brooks.”

I had never seen Cleanth Brooks, the eminent Yale professor emeritus, but I could imagine him striding across campus in a conservative gray suit and neat bow tie—not at all the way Frank Lentricchia looks. The photograph on the book jacket of *Criticism and Social Change* shows a guy in a sports shirt, posed against a graffiti-scarred wall.

In person, Lentricchia is a lot less intimidating. I found him mild-mannered, easygoing and surprisingly conventional in his approach to literature. Standing before his modern-poetry class in a faded blue workshirt open at the neck, he made his way through *The Waste Land* just the way professors used to, line by line, pointing out Eliot’s buried allusions to Ovid and Dante, Marvell and Verlaine.

His work is densely theoretical, yet there’s nothing doctrinaire about it. What comes through is a devotion to the classics that is more visceral than abstract. “I’m interested in social issues as they bear on literature, but what really interests me is the mainline stuff, like Faulkner,” he says after

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JANE TOMPKINS  
Duke University



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class, popping open a beer on the porch of his comfortable home.

One afternoon I talk with Stanley Fish, the chairman of Duke’s English department. Fish has on slacks and a sports jacket, but he doesn’t look any more like Cleanth Brooks—or my image of Cleanth Brooks—than Frank Lentricchia does. He’s never been comfortable with the T.S. Eliot tradition, he says, though he’s one of the leading Milton scholars in America.

Now 50, Fish is maybe a decade older than the generation of radical scholars who came of age in the 1960s; but like many of them, he discovered his vocation largely on his own. “You come from a background where there were no books, the son or daughter of immigrants,” he says. In such a world, Milton was a first name.

For American Jewish writers who grew up in the Depression, the art critic Clement Greenberg once noted, literature offered “a means of flight from the restriction and squalor of the Brooklyns and Bronxes to the wide open world which rewards the successful fugitive with space, importance and wealth.” Making it in those days meant making it on others’ terms: in this case, the terms established by tradition-minded English departments dominated by white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants, which even in the 1940s looked with skeptical distaste upon the Jewish assistant professors who were trying to storm the gates.

Fish and his radical colleagues are no less ambitious. They, too, aspire to “space, importance and wealth,” but on their own terms. Frank Lentricchia has a swimming pool in his backyard. In his work, though, he writes openly and with unashamed ardor, in the autobiographical fashion of the day, about his Italian-American origins, his grandfather in Utica, New York, his working-class Dad.

“To become an intellectual from this kind of background means typically to try to forget where you’ve come from,” he writes in *Criticism and Social Change*. It means becoming “a cosmopolitan gentleman of the world of letters, philosophy and art.”

That’s not Lentricchia’s style. For the scholars of his generation, it’s no longer a matter of proving their claim



**"It used to be thought  
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**GERTRUDE HIMMELFARB**  
City University of New York

on literature; that struggle has been won. What they're demanding now is a literature that reflects their experience, a literature of their own. "Assimilation is a betrayal," says Fish. "The whole idea of 'Americanness' has been thrown in question."

In a way, this was what the debate at Stanford was about. "If you think we are talking about a handful of good books you are mistaken," Bill King, a senior and president of the university's Black Student Union, declared in an eloquent speech before the faculty senate. "We are discussing the foundations of education in America and the acceptance of Euro-America's place in the world as contributor, not creator." Why, King wondered, had he never been taught that Socrates, Herodotus, Pythagoras and Solon owed much of what they knew to African cultures in Egypt, or that "many of the words of Solomon" were borrowed from the black Pharaoh Amen-En-Eope? Where, in the great scheme of things, were *his* people to be found?

Yet "opening up the canon," as the effort to expand the curriculum is called, isn't as radical as it seems. It's a populist, grass-roots phenomenon, American to the core. What could be more democratic than the new *Columbia Literary History of the United States* [see review in *Dialogue* 81]? It incorporates Chippewa Indian poems and Whitman's "Song of Myself," Mark Twain and contemporary writer Jay McInerney. There are chapters on Afro-American literature, Mexican-American literature, Asian-American literature, on immigrant writers of the 19th century and slave narratives of the Civil War.

"There isn't just one story of American literature," says Emory Elliott, chairman of Princeton's English department and the volume's general editor. "Things are wide open."

No group has been more assiduous in the effort to institutionalize new canonical discoveries than the feminists. Gynocriticism, the study of women's literature, is a flourishing academic field. Catalogs list English-department courses in "Feminism,

Modernism and Post-Modernism" and "Shakespeare and Feminism." Margaret Williams Ferguson of Columbia University teaches a course on "Renaissance Women of Letters"—Christine de Pisan, Mary Sidney, Aphra Behn. "This is just the tip of the iceberg," says Harvard's Marjorie Garber. "These aren't just oddities or curiosities, but major writers."

But the feminist enterprise is more than a matter of introducing works by women into the curriculum, or "mainstreaming." Men and women, it is now believed, have different responses to literature. What is needed, says Princeton's Elaine Showalter, one of the most articulate feminist critics around, is a "defamiliarization of masculinity," "a poetics of the Other"—a critical methodology that addresses gender and sexual difference.

On campus bulletin boards I saw notices for lectures on "Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative and Principles of Pleasure"; "Men's Reading, Women's Writing: Canon-Formation and the Case of the 18th-Century French Novel"; "Abulia: Crises of Male Desire in Freud, Thomas Mann and Musil."

Literary criticism in the 1980s is like child raising in the 1980s: both sexes share the burden. Lentricchia's work on Wallace Stevens attempts to sort out the poet's attitude toward his own masculinity—to "feminize" his image. At Harvard, Marjorie Garber is at work on a book about "cross-dressing"—the practice of wearing clothes traditionally worn by the opposite sex. Her book discusses Sherlock Holmes, performance artist Laurie Anderson, old movies. "There's a lot of work to be done on cross-dressing," she says. Her most recent book is *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality*.

Garber has written a shrewd, idiosyncratic book, full of curious lore and lively speculation about hidden sexual motifs in Shakespeare's plays. But isn't the focus somewhat narrow? "They're looking for things to write," says Garber's colleague Walter Jackson Bate, the great biographer of Keats and Samuel Johnson. "You can't write the 40th book on the structure of *Paradise Lost*." Bate is convinced that the humanities are in "their worst state of crisis since the



modern university was formed a century ago”—and that specialization is the cause. “The aim and tradition of literature is to give, if possible, the whole experience of life.”

The idea that literature should reflect our unique identity is “the new academic shibboleth,” Gertrude Himmelfarb, a historian and highly visible proponent of the traditional curriculum, objected recently in *The New York Times*. “It used to be thought that ideas transcend race, gender and class, that there are such things as truth, reason, morality and artistic excellence, which can be understood and aspired to by everyone, of whatever race, gender or class.” Now we have democracy in the syllabus, affirmative action in the classroom. “No one believes in greatness,” Bate says mournfully. “That’s gone.”

All these “texts” that are being rediscovered, republished, “revalorized”—the sermons and spinsters’ diaries, the popular fiction of 1850—are any of them neglected masterpieces? Jane Tompkins makes a persuasive case for the merits of Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (published in 1851 but reissued in 1987 in paperback by the Feminist Press), and it is a powerful book. The story of a young woman orphaned and exiled to bullying relatives in Scotland, Warner’s novel portrays an experience of physical and spiritual renunciation that was obviously familiar to its 19th-century audience. The writing is energetic and vivid, and the humiliations endured by the heroine recall the trials of Lily Bart in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* or Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*.

Only how do you know whether a book is “good” or not? Who decides and by what criteria? There are no universals, Tompkins insists: “It is the context—which eventually includes the work itself—that creates the value its readers ‘discover’ there.” The critic is only part of the story.

What the Duke critics discovered was “the historicization of value,” says Stanley Fish. It’s not that texts have no literal meaning, as the deconstructors

who dominated literary studies in the 1970s believed; they have “an infinite plurality of meanings.” The only way that we can hope to interpret a literary work is by knowing the vantage from which we perform the act of interpretation—in contemporary parlance, where we’re coming from.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith, a power at Duke and a specialist in matters canonical, has written the definitive text on value relativity. *Contingencies of Value* is an exasperating book, especially in the first chapter, where Smith goes on about her life as a professor, and claims to be so close to Shakespeare’s sonnets that “there have been times when I believed that I had written them myself.”

Still, for all her confessional posturing, her self-professed “monstrous” immodesty, Smith is on to something. What is taste? What do we experience when we contemplate a work of art? Like Fish, Smith is less interested in the status of a given work than in how that status is established. Who decides what’s in and what’s out? Those who possess “cultural power.” What is art? Whatever the literary establishment says it is.

Smith’s recent work is, among other things, a shrewd polemic against “high-culture critics” intent upon “epistemic self-stabilization” (that is to say, maintaining the status quo). Just who are these critics? A tribe of “nonacculturated intellectuals,” “post-modern cosmopolites,” “exotic visitors and immigrants.” In other words, professors.

The vanguard of this new professoriate has transformed the landscape of contemporary literature. Many of them are tenured; they publish books. So why do they cultivate an image of themselves as literary outlaws? Frank Lentricchia isn’t the only academic heavy on working-class posturing. D.A. Miller, a professor of comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley, has adorned his latest book with a photograph that mimes Lentricchia’s notorious pose on the back of *Criticism and*

*Social Change*—biceps rippling, arms folded across his chest.

Lentricchia’s new book is titled *Ariel and the Police*. Miller’s is *The Novel and the Police*. Both are ostensibly works of literary criticism—Lentricchia is writing largely about William James and Michel Foucault; Miller, about the Victorian novel—but their real subject is the repressive nature of society, power and the containment of power, how our culture “polices” us.

“Where are the police in *Barchester Towers* (1857)?” Miller asks in a chapter on Anthony Trollope. Where, indeed? They’re “literally nowhere to be found.” But not so fast. Their very absence is significant, Miller claims, proof that Victorian England was a repressed society. The novel, then, is a form of concealment as well as of disclosure. Its truths are latent, murky, undeclared. Miller’s own aim as a critic is to “bring literature out of the classroom and into the closet.”

What’s going on here? Reading between the lines, one begins to get the message. The questioning of authority that’s such a pervasive theme in criticism now is a theoretical version of the battles that were fought on campuses 20 years ago—with real police. “The new epistemology—structuralism, deconstruction—provided the interpretive framework for challenging the canon,” says Tompkins. “It’s out in the hinterlands now. It’s everywhere.”

How will the *New Canonicity*—to coin a term—affect the way literature is taught in America? What will students in the next generation read? It would be presumptuous to guess. But at least the debate has focused public attention on books—not an easy thing to do.

“It’s an issue that’s made literary studies suddenly vital and exciting,” says Gerald Graff of Northwestern. The struggle over who belongs in the canon and what it means is more than a literary matter, Tompkins asserts. “It is a struggle among contending factions for the right to be represented in the picture America draws of itself.” ♦





# In Defense of the Classics

**The great books of Western culture provide a knowledge that is essential to understanding the world, whether one seeks to alter or preserve it.**

By Sidney Hook

*Why study the West? Sidney Hook, the elder statesman of American philosophy, offers a passionate answer to that question and to the charges leveled against traditional courses in Western culture at Stanford and on other campuses. Hook argues that, far from condoning ethnocentrism or glorifying the status quo, Western culture has always been critical of itself. Its classical literature—respected for its quality and not the race, sex or nationality of its creators—expresses conflicting intellectual traditions, including traditions of skepticism and dissent. Without the values and patterns of thought that are the legacy of Western culture, students would lack the conceptual tools to challenge it.*

*Sidney Hook is a Senior Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution, which shares the Stanford University campus. He was formerly chairman of the department of philosophy at New York University and a lecturer at the New School for Social Research. His many books include *The Idea of a Modern University* and *The Ethics of Teaching and Scientific Research*. This article is adapted from an open letter to the Stanford faculty senate printed in the university newspaper.*

As an observer of the educational scene at Stanford University during the last 14 years, I am taking the liberty of offering some comments on the recent reforms in the course on Western culture. Among my professional interests has been a prolonged concern with the philosophy of education and with the philosophy of the curriculum. I greeted with approval Stanford's reintroduction of the course in Western culture in 1980 and have followed closely the discussions of the various reform proposals for it. Such discussions about courses on Western culture—their content, their organization and the most effective methods of teaching them—have been held on many other campuses as well.

There is no need to go over the thoroughly plowed ground to justify a course in Western culture. Aside from the intrinsic value of the study of the outstanding books, ideas, movements and personalities that constitute their subject matter, these courses seek to familiarize students with their common legacy, including the conflicting cultural traditions of the past that have shaped the present and contributed to some of our current difficulties and dilemmas. The materials studied have in part provided us with the basic categories of thought, the conceptual tools, sentiments and dispositions with which to approach the central problems of a reflective life. Far from leading to a glorification of the status quo, as ignorant detractors charge, the knowledge imparted by such courses, prop-

erly taught, is essential to understanding the world of our own experience, whether one seeks to alter or preserve it. Indeed, the ideals of tolerance, the limitations of ethnocentrism, the utopian visions invoked by critics of Western society are all expressed in the literature studied in the course in Western culture. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that of all cultures of which we have knowledge, Western culture has been the most critical of itself.

A course in Western culture on the model of the existing courses at Stanford contributes to enriching the internal landscape of the student's mind in manifold ways, regardless of the individual's specialized vocational choice. Essential to such a course is a common core of readings, modifiable from time to time, without which a coherent, unified program of studies in Western culture, allowing for diversified approaches, cannot be achieved.

Before examining more closely the reform of Stanford's course on Western culture, some observations are in order. The fact that the overwhelming number of students who have completed the course profess to be highly satisfied with its content and manner of instruction, although relevant, is not a decisive consideration. Students should be consulted on any matter that affects them, but the faculty, which confers their degrees, bears the ultimate responsibility for deciding what to teach them, how and when. A faculty cannot surrender its authority to pressure groups inside or outside the university without stultification.

Secondly, I have already referred



to the myth that the tradition of Western culture is something unitary or monolithic rather than a complex of conflicting traditions including those of dissent. I would go further. There is no definitive meaning or moral in any required text that is necessarily imposed on students by its study. A competent teacher can, with any required text, play the role of devil's or angelic advocate. In my teaching days, confronted by a class of skeptics, I would make them see the force of the logic of beliefs in transcendence in its strongest and most sophisticated form. Faced with those frozen in dogmatic religious belief, I would make them aware of the formidable power of Humean skepticism. The greatness of Plato's *Republic* as a perennial philosophical text is that it lends itself to the exciting counterposition of arguments on both sides of themes that have contemporary vibrancy, such as feminism, censorship, the defects of democracy, the snares of totalitarianism and many others.

Thirdly, some of the criticisms of the course are clearly bizarre and others manifestly unwarranted. One of these criticisms asserts that the content and standards of Western culture were restricted to "elite members of Western society." But under the social conditions of the past, who else but the elite could be the creators of culture? Does this criticism imply that the elite contributions are beyond the capacity of Stanford students? What has happened to the pursuit of excellence? Not so long ago, Norman K. Wessells, the university's dean of humanities and sciences, declared that Stanford "continues to assemble on the faculty a group of persons who are among this country's—and indeed the world's—leading scholar/teachers." He goes on to say that "the university's undergraduate body is elite by anyone's standards."

We are also told "that the elite ideas are not the totality of meaningful ideas in a society." Of course if they were, they wouldn't be elite. Yet this tautology is offered as a critique of Western culture. There is a wide variety of other courses in sociology, anthropology, economic history, poli-

tics, etc., in which other aspects of society can be studied. In my Jefferson Lecture, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, "The Humanities and the Defense of Freedom," I have argued that Western democracy owes more to the trade unions and the dissident churches than to the elite humanist tradition. But the justification for the study of the great works of Western culture is not political. The oft-repeated charge that the Western-culture program "propounds white male values and slights the contributions of women and minority groups to the development of the Western tradition" is simply unwarranted.

Finally, the epistemology of the criticism of Western culture is primitive and mistaken especially in the demand that faculty be recruited from "women and people of color" to study ideas and aspects of culture that involve them. Where ideas are concerned, the primary consideration is mastery of subject and not identification with it. One does not have to be German to study Luther or the German Reformation, or sympathetic to the Nazis to study Hitler. One might as well argue that men cannot be gynecologists, that only women are best qualified to study family law, or that only fat physicians can study obesity or hungry people the phenomenon of starvation. One of the greatest contributions to the exposure and struggle against racism in the United States was made by Gunnar Myrdal—a Swedish white man. Race, color, religion, national origin and sexual orientation are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for the fruitful study of the humanities or any subject. In scholarship as in sport today—alas! it was not always so!—the quest should always be for the best qualified.

Scholars in the natural and medical sciences may feel that the aberrant notions I have described above can prevail only in the soft disciplines of the humanities and social studies. Let them not delude themselves. If such views are not laid to rest, wherever they manifest themselves, they will make their presence felt in recruiting

in the natural and medical sciences as well. In some of these fields in the past there have been disgraceful and invidious practices of discrimination on the basis of race, religion and sex. The abolition of discrimination must not be a preface to any kind of reverse discrimination. In some areas we are already hearing criticism of the concept of objectivity and culture-free criteria of scientific validity and claims about the "efficiency of non-Western medical systems" which presumably should be integrated into the curriculum of our medical schools.

There is no need to despair that the contrasts, influence and interactions of non-Western cultures on Western civilization will be lost or neglected. Knowledgeable and skillful teaching can introduce references to parallel or analogous ideas and institutions in cultures other than our own when the material requires them. This can be done without the pretense that the course in Western culture can be transformed into a course of world culture.

Happily, the debate in the Stanford Faculty Senate over the course in Western culture has been free of the false and degrading accusations that marked so much of the discussion in the previous years. A disturbing aspect of the discussion is that all parties to the debate, whatever their views on the wisdom of retaining a core reading list, are agreed that works "by women and persons of color" should be added to the list. One would have thought that the criteria of selection should be intellectual distinction and cultural significance. That there were no women authors on the original list no more signifies that the core list was sexist than the absence of American authors indicates that it was anti-American. We should add works by Americans, women and persons of color only on the basis of their educational significance.

This gratuitous agreement—gratuitous from the standpoint of educational quality—is the clue to the basic political motivation among some of the student groups that originally organized the opposition to the course in Western culture. ♦





# 'Western Civilization' and Its Children

**Reflecting on 40 years of teaching, a history professor gives today's students a high grade.**

By Stephen R. Graubard

*In contrast to critics of contemporary education who lament what they see as a serious fall in standards at America's universities and a retreat from "the Classics," Stephen Graubard draws on a lifetime of teaching experiences to reach a different, upbeat conclusion. While, as he points out in this personal essay, the demands universities make on students have changed, so too have the students' responses. Today, there is admittedly less emphasis on memorization, less dependence on a single authoritative textbook, but students are expected to read thousands of pages of primary source material, much of it from the classics of Western thought. Best of all, Graubard believes the young have developed a healthy appetite for intellectual fare and have become the principal readers of American society.*

*Stephen Graubard is professor of history at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, and editor of the prestigious intellectual journal Daedalus, published by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.*

There is great controversy today about the character and quality of American education. A long-standing concern with schools, elementary and secondary, has in recent years been made even more dramatic by reports of decline at the highest level in America's colleges and universities. In our late-20th-century throwaway culture, where every idea has its season, it has become fashionable to find fault with American higher education, to imagine that both professors and students are engaged in some sort of illicit conspiracy to make over a system that was once perfect, that used to involve students and their professors in close textual study of the "great books" of the ages. Although no one in the United States would seriously argue that the country ought to return to the medicine and health-care system that existed in the 1940s—and while no one sees this as a golden age, now lost—such a proposition for higher education would not seem at all preposterous to many who complain vociferously about what they perceive to be the fall in standards in America's colleges and universities.

All this is happening at a time when assessments of contemporary educational practices are bleak and when fears are widespread that an earlier sense of community created by a common learning in certain basic texts is being eroded. In these circumstances it is difficult to be sanguine. Still, because so much of today's criticism is intemperate, because it summons up images of a past that never existed,

and because it is effective particularly with those who are drawn to the arguments of late-20th-century merchants of nostalgia, it is possible that the post-World War II teaching experience of someone who remains skeptical of contemporary academic Cassettes may serve some purpose.

My own teaching career began in 1947 when, as a graduate student at Harvard University, I assisted in an introductory European-history course familiarly known today (by those who remember) as "the old History I." As a teaching fellow, my obligation was to meet each week with small groups of about 15 students, mostly freshmen, who came to class to be examined and engage in half an hour of discussion. They entered clutching maps, which they would soon be using. These maps were expected to be folded in a prescribed manner; the students were asked to plot major geographical features, turning to the blank side to identify individuals, battles, events and the like—all within 10 minutes, leaving another 10 for an "essay." No student dared miss these weekly sessions, not because of the quality of the discussions but because of the importance of the quizzes. If a student absented himself and the dean sent no medical or other excuse to the instructor explaining the reason for the absence, the student received a grade of zero. No one could afford more than one or two such quiz grades. Bravado was uncommon in those days.

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What, then, did these students, including many mature veterans, men in their 20's, read? The great classics of the Western world? Not at all. Their principal reading was in a textbook, a moderately difficult one, familiarly known as Thompson and Johnson. The weekly assignments were 40 or more pages long, and any fact appearing in those pages might figure in the 20-minute quiz. The students were required also to read in a geographical atlas, an excellent one. Their responsibility was to demonstrate total recall. Many were able, with relative ease, to trace the invasion routes of the Visigoths and the Ostrogoths, of the Vandals and the Huns; they learned that St. Augustine was a church father, that he wrote a book called *The City of God*, that it appeared shortly after A.D. 410, the year of the sack of Rome. They could generally distinguish between Henry I and Henry IV, between Cavour and Mazzini, between Jena and Austerlitz. There were also short readings from primary sources, suggesting that this was indeed a university class, not simply a perpetuation on a somewhat higher level of what the students had already learned at school.

I enjoyed teaching History I. And my former students, when I meet them in New York, Washington or elsewhere, say they remember the course fondly. It was an exciting time to be at Harvard. The coming together of several student generations—because of the war—gave the period a very special character. The course itself was venerable; it had a history. In the staff offices, where we met for our own weekly review sessions, there were photographs of all the greats who had taught it, including a number who were now my own teachers. It made me aware of continuity. If today I no longer recall all the details I once commanded from my own reading of Thompson and Johnson, I do remember the framed letter from Franklin Roosevelt that hung in the staff office, on White House letterhead, addressed to Roger B. Merriam, the professor responsible for giving the course lectures over many decades. The President wrote as one who was now making history, remembering the time he had studied it in History I. I felt very proud to be part

**Curiously enough, the young in many of the better universities have become the principal readers of society, doing so more avidly than their frenetic and sometimes complaining parents.**

of such an enterprise.

From 1948 to 1950, I lived abroad in London, gathering material for my doctoral dissertation. When I returned to Cambridge, History I no longer existed. It had been replaced by a new course called Social Sciences I, a course on Western civilization. Invited again to teach, I found my obligations fundamentally different from what I had experienced just a few years previously. Although there was still a textbook (a much less demanding one), the obligation to memorize from it seemed substantially reduced. Also the readings were markedly changed; the snippets of yesterday had given way to whole works, or to great parts of works, including St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Rousseau's *The Social Contract* and the like. The quizzes had disappeared; so too had the notices from

the dean excusing class absences. Students were required to write extensively outside of class, in essays that never pretended to be research papers. The examinations were substantially more ambitious; they dealt more concretely with ideas. As terms like *Judeo-Christian*, *anti-intellectual*, *positivist*, *materialist* and *utopian* issued from the lecturers' mouths, and as all these concepts and many others came to figure more regularly in examinations, where chronology and narrative no longer mattered as much, I realized how great a distance I had traveled since I had first begun teaching, how different this was from anything I had studied either in college or even earlier. In its own way, the new course was also very heady.

No one asked how all this had come about. I did not know, or read at the time, the famous Harvard faculty report, "General Education in a Free Society," prepared during the war, that had led to the curriculum reform from which I was now profiting. Had I read the report then, I might have realized more fully Harvard's wartime intentions. What would I have thought of the idea, for example, that "education in the great books can be looked on as a secular continuation of the spirit of Protestantism"? Would I have thought slightly old-fashioned the distinctions that were made between Jeffersonianism and Jacksonianism, with their putatively large implications for contemporary America? It is impossible to know. I cannot even say for certain that I would at that time have understood that Harvard had adopted, in its new concern with primary texts, a curriculum that Columbia University and others had been using for a quarter of a century or longer.

Although the "General Education" report spoke of a course on "Western Thought and Institutions," no single course, even then, could possibly accommodate all the classics of the Western tradition. Instead, the faculty legislation mandated several courses. In one, the readings were heavily sociological and political: Max Weber, Karl Marx, John Locke and Thomas Hobbes figured prominently. In another—in time developed by a colleague and myself, and somewhat grandiloquently entitled "Free-



dom and Authority in the Modern World"—the assigned readings included thousands of pages from Karl Mannheim, Jacques Maritain, Joseph Schumpeter, Sigmund Freud, Bertrand de Jouvenel and a host of others. It was all a very far cry from Visigothic invasions, royal chronologies and military battles. The books were undoubtedly "great," but over a nine-year period we changed them periodically, not necessarily for greater ones but for others that would more fully serve our pedagogic purposes. Meeting former students, decades later, I am gratified by their comments. Did they, in a course that dwelled so heavily on texts, learn less than those who had once been obliged to memorize from a text, from a textbook, an American publisher's invention? Who is to say?

And so one arrives at the present. Decades have passed and because of faculty retirements I find myself again teaching an introductory course in European history—this time at Brown University—to students at upper levels as well as to freshmen. The course, although interesting, is not, at least for me, a nostalgic return to the days of my youth; the world of 1988, however it is perceived, is not the world of 1947 or 1957. I cannot find a new textbook like Thompson and Johnson, nor do I have any wish to. As for dwelling only on texts—the *important* ones—I do not know how I could manage to include them all, or whether the colleague who will be taking over next year would wish to use them. Why should she? Her ideas about the course will certainly differ from mine.

What do I ask my students to read? They begin with Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, but are also required to read Alexis de Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, the whole of the latter in a single week. I have yet to learn to be more modest in my demands. There are other assignments in major texts: John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, John Maynard Keynes. Because the course is not simply about texts, and

because I reject the idea that I ought to be calling it something fancy like "Texts in Contexts," I simply refer to problems: peacemaking, revolutions, wars, social change, intellectual transformations. My students read Henry Kissinger on the Congress of Vienna, Winston Churchill on the coming of World War II; they are asked to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the interpretation of each. Their study is not so much of bias as of method, and they are led to reflect on how this method will invariably shape interpretation. Because I also want them to know what professional historians do today, I invite them to read Gordon Craig on Germany, Sheila Fitzpatrick on the Russian Revolution, Michael Howard on war. Can anyone who knows these three doubt that my object is not indoctrination? I find two of them appealing for very different reasons; but the other, for me, is substantially less persuasive. My values, even in books, need not be those of my students. Indeed, I take for granted that they will not be.

How does this generation—whose detractors see them as glued to television in infancy, childhood and early adolescence, addicted to other vices in their more mature years—react to such a reading list? They appear to enjoy it; at least they say they do. Their essays suggest a fair level of comprehension; some write remarkably well. In their discussions, particularly of the more difficult texts, there is a greater fumbling, less assurance. It is not always apparent that those who went to the "best" schools—as defined by what society is said to esteem the most—are best prepared for such reading. It would appear, however, that those who come to the university not totally innocent about Ypres and Verdun, with some faint recollection of having read about the Ems dispatch or the "Khaki Election" (and these are a small minority), may indeed be advantaged.

As for my students' values, while they are clearly not those of Matthew Arnold or T.S. Eliot, it is not apparent that they are as banal or as inferior as certain critics have suggested. The surprising thing is that although their exposure to many great books before their arrival at the university is not all

one might wish, in the land of second and third chances it is remarkable what can be accomplished even very late in the day.

One of the few undeniable pleasures of living in the last part of the 20th century is that so much of the world's literature—which is much more than its literary works—is now available, often in excellent English translations. These works are there, waiting to be read. The problem is to find the time to do so. Curiously enough, the young in many of the better universities have become the principal readers of American society, doing so more avidly than their frenetic and sometimes complaining parents. While neither Tocqueville nor Weber wrote with a 20th-century American undergraduate audience in mind—and while neither provided intellectual fare particularly suited to late adolescents or young adults—they and many others, dispersed over numerous fields, have an appeal today for discriminating readers, not a few of whom happen to be young.

Lest all this be thought a description simply of the curriculum as it exists in so-called Ivy League institutions huddled in America's Northeast, it would be well for critics to extend their gaze over the country as a whole—to look not only at Stanford but at the University of California system, at Texas and Vanderbilt, Emory and Duke, Michigan and Indiana, Virginia and Georgetown, Minnesota and Wisconsin and dozens of others—to determine whether the reports of intellectual decline are not greatly exaggerated, whether they may not indeed be wholly false. Students in good number appear to be buying and reading "great books." Whether more did so in 1900, it is impossible to know. My own experience speaks only of the last 40 years. It tells me that I have no wish to return to 1948. ♦

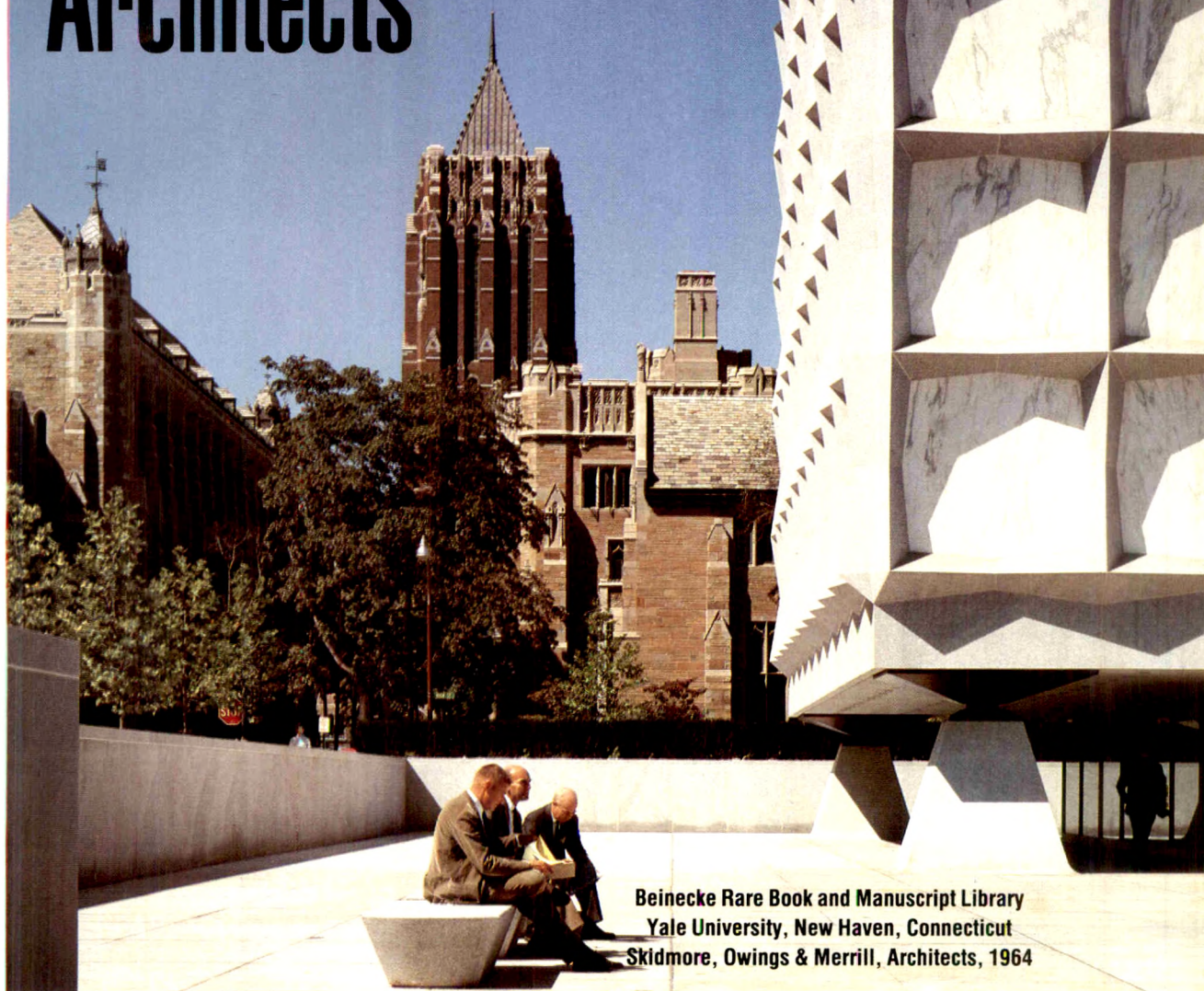




# LIBRARIES ON CAMPUS

## Designs by Innovative Architects

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Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library  
Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut  
Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Architects, 1964



**A**t many an American university, an intellectual battle rages between classicists who want to limit the Great Books to a few traditional masterpieces and innovators who would redefine the standards. But university librarians might say that the real “battle of the books” is not over what belongs in the canon of the classics but over where to put the thousands of new volumes engendered by the information boom of the past 25 years. The enormous increase in the number of scholarly works published each year and the development of new technologies like microfilm and computerized data banks—combined with libraries’ existing accumulation of wisdom from the past—have created the problem of how to house all this material.

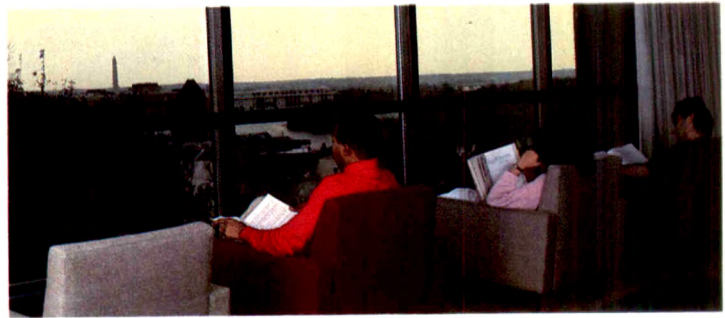
From an architect’s point of view, the challenge is to create buildings that respect the traditional ivy-covered esthetics of many campuses, and yet acknowledge the energy of contemporary architecture and the modern design credo that form should follow function. The six libraries presented on these pages are recipients of the Library Buildings Award given by the American Institute of Architects and the American Library Association, and each offers an outstanding solution to this and other architectural problems.

The awards jury described the Beinecke Rare Book Library at Yale University (previous page) as “an elegant statement and dramatization of the fact that the building contains great treasures.” The Yale collection comprises a virtual history of letters from ancient Egyptian papyri to Eugene O’Neill’s manuscript for *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. The library conserves its treasures in a carefully controlled atmosphere, allowing scholars access to these valuable books and manuscripts. Architect Gordon Bunshaft designed the building’s stone facade and the surrounding granite plaza to complement neighboring Gothic buildings.

The style of Georgetown University’s Lauinger Library (right) also defers to a campus landmark: the Romanesque spires of the Healy Building (far right below). Situated on a ridge overlooking the Potomac River and projecting only a few meters above the tree line, the library preserves the natural beauty of the setting; its glass-walled reading lounges face the river (far right above).

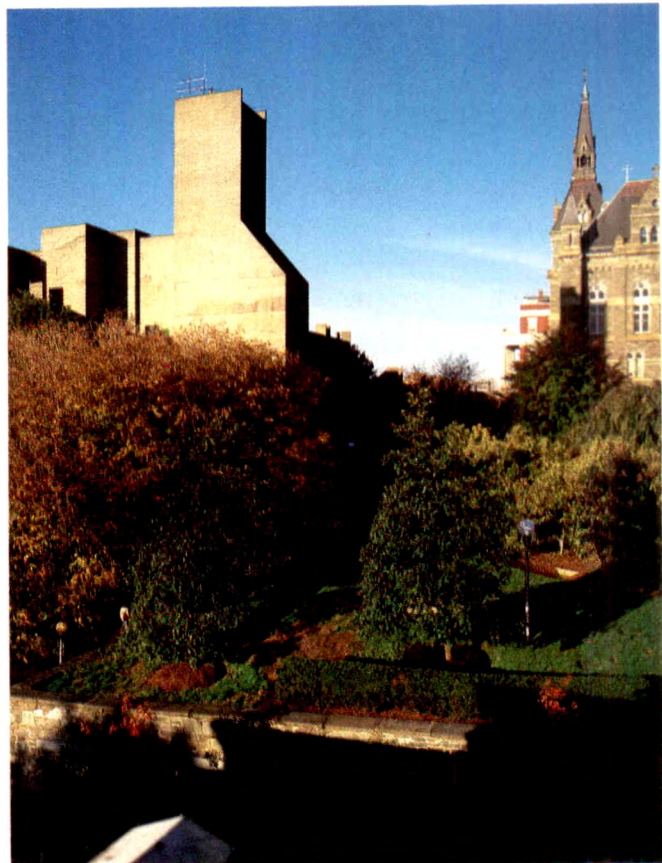




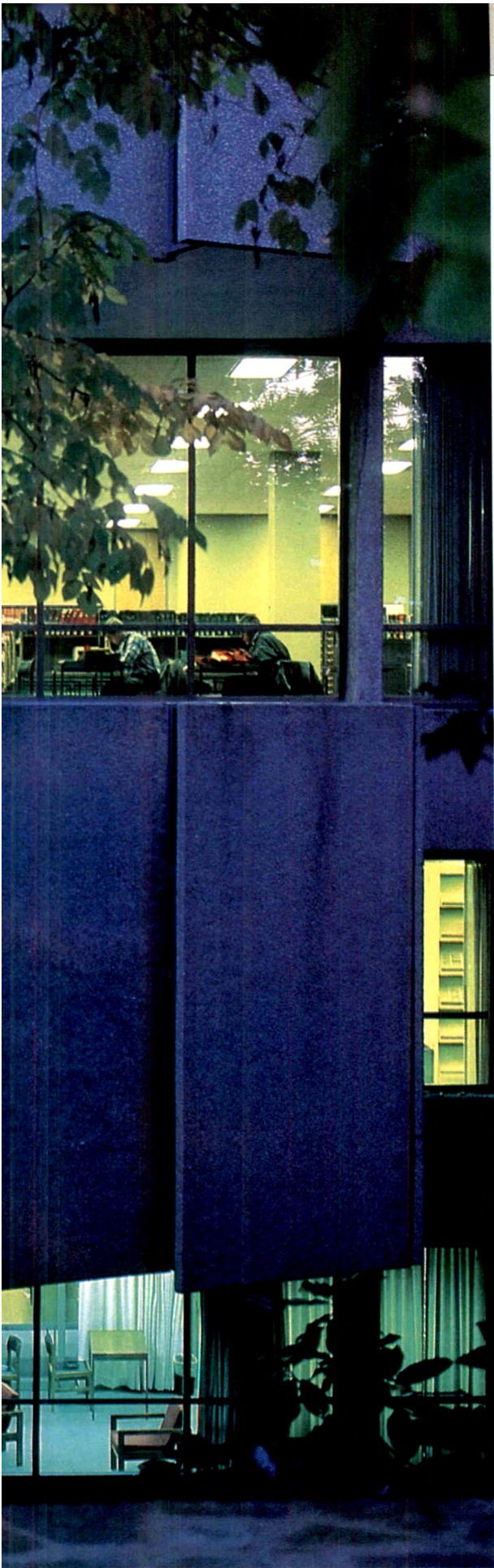


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**Joseph Mark Lauinger Memorial Library**  
Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.  
John Carl Warnecke and Associates, Architects, 1976



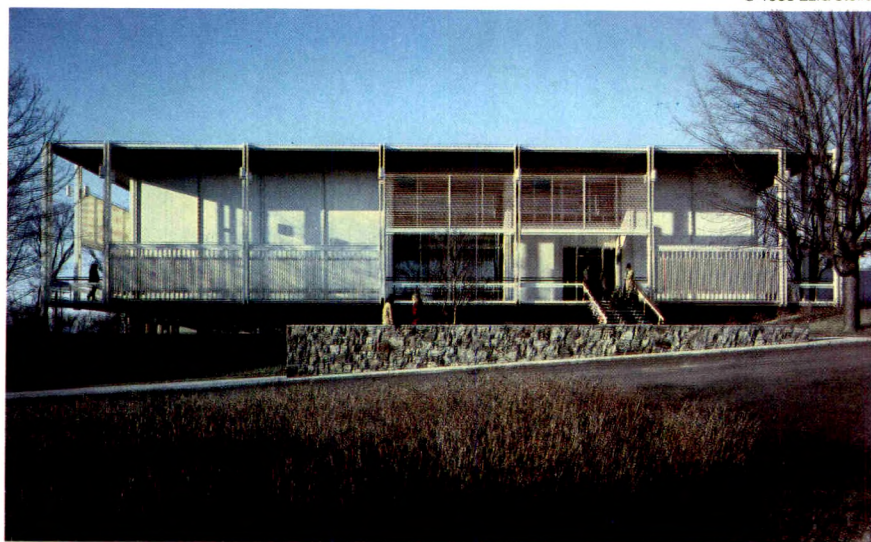
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**T**he libraries shown here speak to the distinct needs of students and faculty at a prestigious graduate school, a small liberal-arts college and an experimental campus in a large state-university system. The University of Chicago's Regenstein Library (right), a graduate library for the social sciences and humanities, is organized as one vast collection of books because of the cross-disciplinary research often required in these fields. The Bennington College library (below) is designed to be a friendly, inviting place that reflects this Vermont college's imaginative and highly individualized approach to education. The Adlai E. Stevenson College Library (far right) serves as a quiet study area for one of the seven colleges that make up the University of California's Santa Cruz campus; about half of Stevenson College's 1000 students live off campus and use the library as a haven between classes.

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**Edward Clark Crossett Library**  
Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont  
Pietro Belluschi and Carl Koch and Associates, Architects, 1963

**Joseph Regenstein Library**  
University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois  
Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Architects, 1972







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**Adlai E. Stevenson College Library**  
University of California, Santa Cruz, California  
Joseph Esherick and Associates, Architects, 1970

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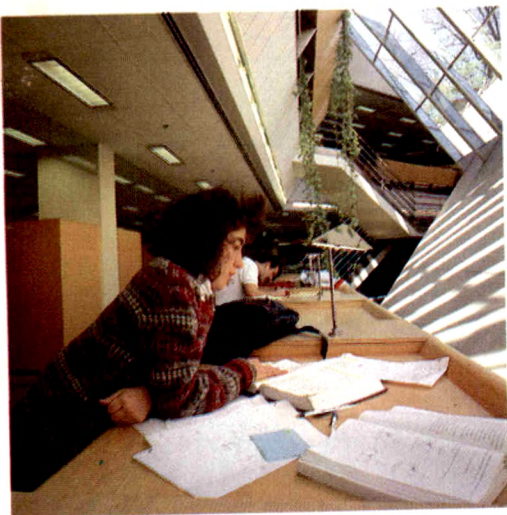




**W**hen the University of Michigan set out to expand its law library, there were seemingly irreconcilable expectations. Library users wanted a large open workplace close to the Legal Research Building (bottom); alumni, whose donations would fund the addition, sought to preserve the atmosphere of the law school's venerated Gothic quadrangle. The solution? Build one of the more daring underground facilities in America. A limestone-lined light well (right and below) stretches along two sides of the new library, flooding the underground space with natural light and giving all three tiers of the library a view of the outside. The light well also allows for a strong visual connection to the old Legal Research Building; seen from below, the cathedral-like structure stands out against the sky.

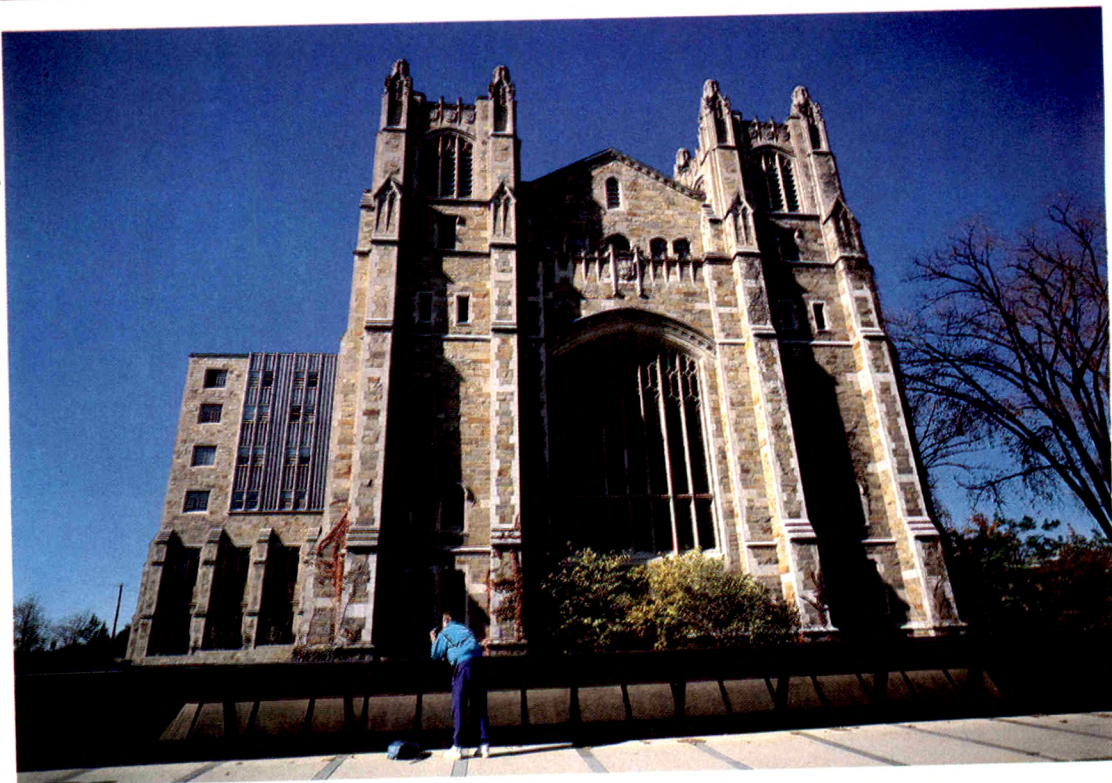
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**University of Michigan Law Library Addition**  
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan  
Gunnar Birkerts and Associates, Architects, 1985

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THE AMERICAN REVIEW

# IS THE UNIVERSE

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# A COMPUTER?

By Robert Wright

The controversial scientist Edward Fredkin argues that the universe is analogous to a computer program designed to answer a question.

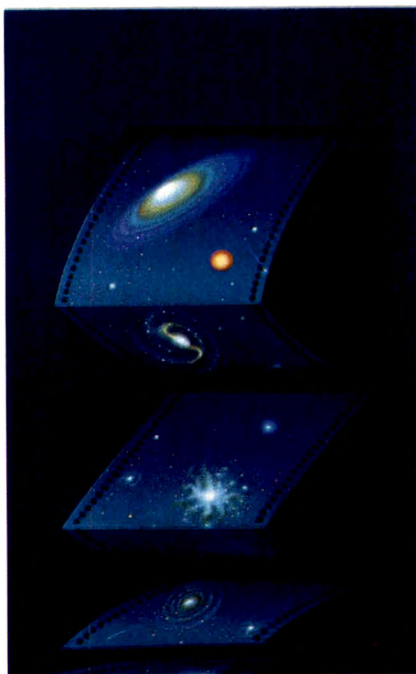
*One of the foremost computer scientists in the United States, Edward Fredkin is a multidisciplinary genius who works in a twilight zone where computer science meets the highest realms of physics. His work has produced some idiosyncratic theories: that information is more fundamental than matter or energy and that the universe itself is much like computer software. This in turn leads to metaphysical and religious speculations about free will, the nature of reality and the purpose of the universe. Although Fredkin says he does not have "any religious belief," he is convinced "that this particular universe we have is a consequence of something I would call intelligent."*

*Robert Wright, a senior editor of The New Republic, is the author of Three Scientists and Their Gods: Looking for Meaning in an Age of Information, from which this profile of Edward Fredkin and his ideas has been excerpted. Previously a senior editor of The Sciences, Wright won a 1986 National Magazine Award for his column, "The Information Age."*

Ed Fredkin is scanning the visual field systematically. He checks the instrument panel regularly. He is cool, collected, in control. He is the optimally efficient pilot.

The plane is a six-passenger single-engine amphibious Cessna, the kind with the wheels recessed in pontoons. Fredkin bought it not long ago and is still working out a few kinks; right now he is taking it for a spin above the British Virgin Islands after some minor mechanical work.

From the book *Three Scientists and Their Gods* by Robert Wright. ©1988 by Robert Wright. Published by arrangement with Times Books, a division of Random House, Inc. "Did the Universe Just Happen?" was first published by *The Atlantic* magazine in its April 1988 issue.



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Though hired to teach computer science, and then selected to guide MIT's now-eminent computer-science laboratory through some of its formative years, he soon branched out into more-offbeat things. Perhaps the most idiosyncratic of the courses he has taught is one on "digital physics," in which he propounded the most idiosyncratic of his several idiosyncratic theories. This theory is the reason I've come to Fredkin's island. Ed Fredkin thinks that the universe is a computer.

Fredkin works in a twilight zone of modern science—the interface of computer science and physics. Here two concepts that traditionally have ranked among science's most fundamental—matter and energy—keep bumping into a third: information. The exact relationship among the three is a question without a clear answer, a question vague enough, and basic enough, to have inspired a wide variety of opinions. Information, some scientists will tell you, is just one of many forms of matter and energy; it is embodied in things like a computer's electrons and a brain's neural firings, things like newsprint and radio waves, and that is that. Others talk in grander terms, suggesting that information deserves full equality with matter and energy, that it should join them in some sort of scientific trinity, that these three things are the main ingredients of reality.

Fredkin goes further still. According to his theory of digital physics, information is more fundamental than matter and energy. He believes that atoms, electrons and quarks consist ultimately of bits—binary units of information, like those that are the currency of computation in a personal computer or

Fredkin's island, which soon comes into view, is about 50 hectares, and the hill that constitutes its bulk is a deep green. Its beaches range from prosaic to sublime, and the coral in the waters just offshore attracts little and big fish whose colors look as if they were coordinated by a fashion designer. On the island's west side are immense rocks, suitable for careful climbing, and on the east side are a bar and restaurant and a modest hotel. Between east and west is Fredkin's secluded island villa—a nice place for Fredkin to spend the few weeks of each year when he is not up in the Boston area tending his various other businesses.

In addition to being a self-made millionaire, Fredkin is a self-made intellectual. Twenty years ago, at the age of 34, without so much as a bachelor's degree to his name, he became a full professor at MIT.



*'There are three great philosophical questions,' Fredkin says.  
'What is life? What is thinking and memory? And how does the universe work?'  
He says that his 'informational viewpoint' encompasses all three.*

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a pocket calculator. And he believes that the behavior of those bits, and thus of the entire universe, is governed by a single programming rule. This rule, Fredkin says, is something fairly simple, something vastly less arcane than the mathematical constructs that conventional physicists use to explain the dynamics of physical reality. Yet through ceaseless repetition—by tirelessly taking information it has just transformed and transforming it further—it has generated pervasive complexity. Fredkin calls this rule, with discernible reverence, “the cause and prime mover of everything.”

At the restaurant on Fredkin's island, it is lunchtime now, and Fredkin is sitting in a cane-and-wicker chair across the table from me. He was out trying to windsurf this morning, and he enjoyed only the marginal success that one would predict on the basis of his appearance. He is fairly tall and very thin, and has a softness about him—a gentleness of manner—and the complexion of a scholar, even after a week on the island.

Fredkin is a pleasant mealtime companion. He has much to say that is interesting, which is fortunate because generally he does most of the talking. He has little curiosity about other people's minds, unless their interests happen to coincide with his, which few people's do. “There are three great philosophical questions,” he begins. “What is life? What is consciousness and thinking and memory and all that? And how does the universe work?” He says that his “informational viewpoint” encompasses all three. Take life, for example. Deoxyribonucleic acid, the material of heredity, is “a good example of digitally encoded information,” he says. “The information that implies what a creature or a plant is going to be is encoded; it has its representation in

the DNA, right? OK, now, there is a process that takes that information and transforms it into the creature, OK?” His point is that a mouse, for example, is “a big, complicated informational process.”

Fredkin exudes rationality. He rarely displays emotion. He has never seen a problem that didn't have a perfectly logical solution, and he believes strongly that intelligence can be mechanized without limit. More than 10 years ago he founded the Fredkin Prize, a \$100,000 award to be given to the creator of the computer program that can beat a world chess champion. No one has won it yet, and Fredkin hopes to have the award raised to one million dollars.

Fredkin is hardly alone in considering DNA a form of information, but this observation was less common back when he first made it. So too with many of his ideas. When his world view crystallized, a quarter of a century ago, he immediately saw dozens of large-scale implications, in fields ranging from physics to biology to psychology. A number of these have gained currency since then, and he considers this trend an ongoing substantiation of his entire outlook.

“What I'm saying is that at the most basic level of complexity an information process runs what we think of as physics. At the much higher level of complexity, life and DNA—you know, the biochemical functions—are controlled by a digital information process. Then, at another level, our thought processes are basically information processing.” That is not to say, he stresses, that everything is best viewed as information. “It's just like there's mathematics and all these other things, but not *everything* is best viewed from a mathematical viewpoint. So what's being said is not that this comes along and replaces everything. It's one more avenue of

modeling reality, and it happens to cover the sort of three biggest philosophical mysteries.”

Among the scientists who don't dismiss Fredkin's theory of digital physics out of hand is Marvin Minsky, a computer scientist at MIT, whose renown approaches cultic proportions in some circles. Minsky calls Fredkin “Einstein-like” in his ability to find deep principles through simple intellectual excursions. If it is true that most physicists think Fredkin is off the wall, Minsky told me, it is also true that “most physicists are the ones who don't invent new theories”; they go about their work with tunnel vision, never questioning the dogma of the day. When it comes to the kind of basic reformulation of thought proposed by Fredkin, “there's no point in talking to anyone but a Feynman or an Einstein or a Pauli,” Minsky says. I talked with Richard Feynman, a Nobel laureate at the California Institute of Technology, before his death in February 1988. Feynman considered Fredkin a brilliant and consistently original, though sometimes incautious, thinker. If anyone is going to come up with a new and fruitful way of looking at physics, Feynman said, Fredkin will.

Notwithstanding their moral support, though, neither Feynman nor Minsky was ever convinced that the universe is a computer. They were endorsing Fredkin's mind, not this particular manifestation of it. When it comes to digital physics, Ed Fredkin is flying solo.

He knows that, and he regrets that his ideas continue to lack the support of his colleagues. But his self-confidence is unshaken. You see, Fredkin has had an odd childhood, and an odd education, and an odd career, all of which, he explains, have endowed him with an odd perspective, from which the essential nature of the universe happens to be clearly visible.





### A FINELY MOTTLED UNIVERSE

The prime mover of everything, the single principle that governs the universe, lies somewhere within a class of computer programs known as cellular automata, according to Fredkin.

The *cellular automaton* was invented in the early 1950s by John von Neumann, one of the architects of computer science and a seminal thinker in several other fields. The word *cellular* is not meant biologically when used in this context. It refers, rather, to adjacent spaces—cells—that together form a pattern. These days the cells typically appear on a computer screen, though von Neumann, lacking this convenience, rendered them on paper.

In some respects cellular automata resemble those splendid graphic displays produced by patriotic masses and by avid football fans at American universities. Holding up large colored cards on cue, they can collectively generate a portrait of a national leader or a school symbol—for instance, the Trojan warrior of the University of Southern California. More impressive still, one portrait can fade out and another crystallize in no time at all. It is a spectacular feat of precision and planning.

But suppose there were no planning. Suppose that instead of arranging a succession of cards to display, everyone learned a single rule for repeatedly determining which card was called for next. This rule might assume any of a number of forms. For example, in a crowd

where all cards were either blue or white, each card holder could be instructed to look at his own card and the cards of his four nearest neighbors—to his front, back, left and right—and do what the majority did during the last frame. Alternatively, each card holder could be instructed to do the opposite of what the majority did. In either event the result would be a series not of predetermined portraits but of more abstract, unpredicted patterns. If we began with the USC Trojan, its white face might dissolve into a sea of blue, as whitecaps drifted aimlessly across the stadium. Conversely, an ocean of randomness could yield islands of structure—not a Trojan, perhaps, but at least something that didn't look entirely accidental.

This leaves room for abundant variety. There are many ways to define a neighborhood, and for any given neighborhood there are many possible rules, most of them more complicated than blind conformity or implacable nonconformity. All told, the number of possible rules is an exponential function of the number of cells in the neighborhood; the von Neumann neighborhood alone—a five-cell group—has  $2^{32}$ , or around 4000 million, possible rules. But whatever neighborhoods, and whatever rules, are programmed into a computer, two things are always true of cellular automata: all cells use the same rule to determine future behavior by reference to the past behavior of neighbors, and all cells obey the rule simultaneously, time after time.

In the late 1950s, shortly after becoming acquainted with cellular automata, Fredkin began playing around with rules, selecting the powerful and interesting and discarding the weak and bland. He found, for example, that any rule requiring all four of a cell's immediate neighbors to be lit up in order for the cell itself to be lit up at the next moment would not provide sustained entertainment; a single "off" cell would proliferate until

darkness covered the computer screen. But equally simple rules could create great complexity. The first such rule discovered by Fredkin dictated that a cell be on if an odd number of cells in its von Neumann neighborhood had been on, and off otherwise. After "seeding" a good, powerful rule with an irregular landscape of off and on cells, Fredkin could watch rich patterns bloom, some freezing upon maturity, some dissipating, others locking into a cycle of growth and decay. A colleague, after watching one of Fredkin's rules in action, suggested that he sell the program to a designer of Persian rugs.

Today new cellular-automaton rules are formulated and tested by the "information-mechanics group" founded by Fredkin at MIT's computer-science laboratory. The core of the group is an international duo of physicists, Tommaso Toffoli of Italy and Norman Margolus of Canada. They differ in the degree to which they take Fredkin's theory of physics seriously, but both agree with him that there is value in exploring the relationship between computation and physics, and they have spent much time using cellular automata to simulate physical processes.

Fredkin believes that cellular automata will more faithfully mirror reality as they are applied to its more fundamental levels and the rules needed to model the motion of molecules, atoms, electrons and quarks are uncovered. And he believes that at the most fundamental level (whatever that turns out to be) the automaton will describe the physical world with perfect precision, because at that level the universe is a cellular automaton in three dimensions—a crystalline lattice of interacting logic units, each one "deciding" zillions of times per second whether it will be off or on at the next point in time. The information thus produced, Fredkin says, is the fabric of reality, the stuff of which matter and energy are made. An electron, in Fredkin's universe,



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*He works in a twilight zone of modern science—the interface of computer science and physics. He believes that atoms, electrons and quarks consist ultimately of binary units of information, like those in a computer.*

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is nothing more than a pattern of information, and an orbiting electron is nothing more than that pattern moving. Indeed, even this motion is in some sense illusory: the bits of information that constitute the pattern never move, any more than football fans would change places to slide a USC Trojan four seats to the left. Each bit stays put and confines its activity to blinking on and off. “You see, I don’t believe that there are objects like electrons and photons, and things which are themselves and nothing else,” Fredkin says. “What I believe is that there’s an information process, and the bits, when they’re in certain configurations, behave like the thing we call the electron, or the hydrogen atom, or whatever.”

The reader may now have a number of questions that unless satisfactorily answered will lead to something approaching contempt for Fredkin’s thinking. One such question concerns the way cellular automata chop space and time into little bits. Most conventional theories of physics reflect the intuition that reality is continuous—that one “point” in time is no such thing but, rather, flows seamlessly into the next, and that space, similarly, doesn’t come in little chunks but is perfectly smooth. Fredkin’s theory implies that both space and time have a graininess to them, and that the grains cannot be chopped up into smaller grains; that people and dogs and trees and oceans, at rock bottom, are more like mosaics than like paintings; and that time’s essence is better captured by a digital watch than by a grandfather clock.

The obvious question is, Why do space and time *seem* continuous if they are not? The obvious answer is, The cubes of space and points of time are very, very small: time seems continuous in just the way

that movies seem to move when in fact they are frames, and the illusion of spatial continuity is akin to the emergence of smooth shades from the finely mottled texture of a newspaper photograph.

The obvious answer, Fredkin says, is not the whole answer; the illusion of continuity is yet more deeply ingrained in our situation. Even if the ticks on the universal clock were, in some absolute sense, very slow, time would still seem continuous to us, since our perception, itself proceeding in the same ticks, would be no more finely grained than the processes being perceived. So too with spatial perception: can eyes composed of the smallest units in existence perceive those units? Could any information process sense its ultimate constituents? The point is that the basic units of time and space in Fredkin’s reality don’t just happen to be imperceptibly small. As long as the creatures doing the perceiving are in that reality, the units *have* to be imperceptibly small.

Edward Fredkin was born in 1934, the last of three children in a previously prosperous family. His father had come to southern California from Russia shortly after the Revolution and founded a chain of radio stores that did not survive the Great Depression. The family learned economy, and Fredkin has not forgotten it.

He can reach into his pocket, pull out a tissue that should have been retired weeks ago, and, with cleaning solution, make an entire airplane windshield clear. He can take even a well-written computer program, sift through it for superfluous instructions, and edit it accordingly, reducing both its size and its running time.

Fredkin always considered himself the smartest kid in his class. He used to place bets with other stu-

dents on exam scores. This habit did not endear him to his peers, and he seems in general to have lacked the prerequisites of popularity. His sense of humor was unusual. His interests were not widely shared. His physique was not a force to be reckoned with.

It was mechanisms that captured Fredkin’s attention. From an early age he was viscerally attracted to alarm clocks, which he methodically took apart and put back together. So while other kids were playing baseball or chasing girls, Ed Fredkin was taking things apart and putting them back together. “I always got along well with machines,” he remembers.

After graduation from secondary school, in 1952, Fredkin headed for the California Institute of Technology. One of the few lessons he learned is that college is different from secondary school: in college if you don’t study, you flunk out. This he did a few months into his sophomore year. Then, following in his brother’s footsteps, he joined the U.S. Air Force and learned to fly fighter planes.

It was the Air Force that finally brought Fredkin face to face with a computer. He was working for a unit given the job of testing a computerized air-defense system. To do this the Air Force needed men who knew something about computers, and so in 1956 a group including Fredkin was sent to MIT and enrolled in computer-science courses. “Everything made instant sense to me,” Fredkin remembers. “I just soaked it up like a sponge.” The IBM computer he worked with was in some respects preferable to every other conglomeration of matter he had encountered—more sophisticated and flexible than other inorganic machines, and more logical than organic ones. “See, when I



write a program, if I write it correctly, it will work. If I'm dealing with a person, and I tell him something, and I tell him correctly, it may or may not work."

The computer, in short, was an intelligence with which Fredkin could empathize. It was the ultimate embodiment of mechanical predictability, the refuge to which as a child he had retreated from the incomprehensibly hostile world of humanity.

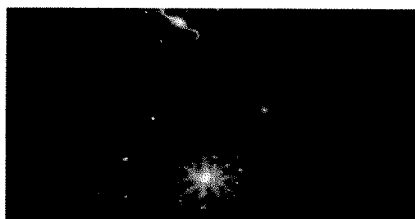
During several years after his arrival at MIT, as Fredkin was joining the first generation of computer hackers, he was also immersing himself in physics—finally learning through self-instruction the lessons he had missed by dropping out of Caltech. It is this two-track education, Fredkin says, that led him to the theory of digital physics. Many physicists acquire as children the sort of kinship with mechanism that he still feels, but in most cases it is later diluted by formal education; quantum mechanics, the prevailing paradigm in contemporary physics, seems to imply that at its core, reality has truly random elements and is thus inherently unpredictable. But Fredkin escaped the usual indoctrination. To this day he maintains, as did Albert Einstein, that the common interpretation of quantum mechanics is mistaken—that any seeming indeterminacy in the subatomic world reflects only our ignorance of the determining principles, not their absence. This is a critical belief, for if he is wrong and the universe is *not* ultimately deterministic, then it cannot be governed by a process as exacting as computation.

After leaving the Air Force, Fredkin went to work for Bolt Beranek and Newman, a consulting firm in the Boston area, now known for its work in artificial intelligence and computer networking. His supervisor at BBN, J.C.R. Licklider, says of his first encounter with Fredkin, "It was obvious to me he was very unusual and probably a genius, and

the more I came to know him, the more I came to think that that was not too elevated a description." Licklider would give Fredkin a problem to work on. Fredkin would retreat to his office and return 20 or 30 hours later with the solution—or, rather, *a* solution; he often came back with the answer to a question different from the one that Licklider had asked. Fredkin's focus was intense but undisciplined, and it tended to stray from a problem as soon as he was confident that he understood the solution in principle.

This intellectual wanderlust is one of Fredkin's most enduring and exasperating traits. Just about everyone who knows him has a way of describing it: "He doesn't really work. He sort of fiddles." "Very often he has these great ideas." "There is a gap between the quality of the original ideas and what follows. There's an imbalance there."

Among the ideas that congealed in Fredkin's mind during his stay at BBN is the one that gave him his current reputation as (depending on whom you talk to) a thinker of great depth and rare insight, a source of interesting but reckless speculation, or a crackpot.



### TICK BY TICK, DOT BY DOT

The idea that the universe is a computer was inspired partly by the idea of the *universal computer*. A universal computer can simulate any process that can be precisely described and perform any calculation that is performable.

This broad power is ultimately grounded in something very simple: the algorithm is a fixed procedure for converting input into output, for tak-

ing one body of information and turning it into another. For example, a computer program that takes any number it is given, squares it, and subtracts three is an algorithm. This isn't a very powerful algorithm; by taking a 3 and turning it into a 6, it hasn't created much new information. But algorithms become more powerful with recursion. A *recursive* algorithm is an algorithm whose output is fed back into it as input. Thus the algorithm that turned 3 into 6, if operating recursively, would continue, turning 6 into 33, then 33 into 1,086, then 1,086 into 1,179,393 and so on.

The power of recursive algorithms is especially apparent in the simulation of physical processes. While Fredkin was at BBN, he would use the company's computer to simulate, say, two particles, one that was positively charged and one that was negatively charged, orbiting each other in accordance with the laws of electromagnetism. The program he had written took the particles' velocities and positions at one point in time, computed those variables for the next point in time, and then fed the new variables back into the algorithm to get newer variables—and so on and so on, thousands of times a second. It was in these orbiting dots that Fredkin first saw the appeal of his kind of universe—a universe that proceeds tick by tick and dot by dot, a universe in which complexity boils down to rules of elementary simplicity.

Fredkin's discovery of cellular automata a few years later permitted him further to indulge his taste for economy of information and strengthened his bond with the recursive algorithm. The patterns of automata are often all but impossible to describe with calculus yet easy to express algorithmically. Nothing is so striking about a good cellular automaton as the contrast between the simplicity of the underlying algorithm and the richness of its result. We have all felt the attraction of such contrasts. It accompanies the comprehension of any process, conceptual or physical, by which simplicity accommodates com-



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*Fredkin's theory implies that both space and time have a graininess to them, and that the grains cannot be chopped up into smaller grains; that people and dogs and trees and oceans are more like mosaics than paintings.*

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plexity. Simple solutions to complex problems make us feel good—for example, the architect who eliminates several nagging design flaws by moving a single closet.

For scientists, the moment of discovery does not simply reinforce the search for knowledge; it inspires further research. Indeed, it *directs* research. The unifying principle, upon its apprehension, can elicit such devotion that thereafter the scientist looks everywhere for manifestations of it. It was the scientist in Fredkin who, upon seeing how a simple programming rule could yield immense complexity, got excited about looking at physics in a new way and stayed excited.

In 1962 Fredkin resigned from BBN and founded Information International Incorporated—an impressive name for a company with no assets and no clients, whose sole employee had never graduated from college. Triple-I, as the company came to be called, was placed on the road to riches by an odd job that Fredkin performed for the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute. One of Woods Hole's experiments had run into a complication: underwater instruments had faithfully recorded the changing direction and strength of deepocean currents, but the information, encoded in tiny dots of light on 16-mm film, was inaccessible to the computers that were supposed to analyze it. Fredkin rented a 16-mm movie projector and with a simple modification turned it into a machine for translating those dots into terms the computer could accept.

The Air Force, RCA and other companies, it turned out, also needed to turn visual patterns into digital data, and more sophisticated versions of "programmable film readers" that sold for \$500,000 apiece became Triple-I's stock-in-trade. In 1968 Triple-I sold shares to the public and Fredkin was a millionaire. First he bought a

ranch in Colorado. Then one day he was thumbing through the classifieds and saw that an island in the Caribbean was for sale. He bought it.

In the early 1960s, at the suggestion of the Defense Department's Advanced Research Project Agency, MIT set up what would become its Laboratory for Computer Science. It was then called Project MAC, an acronym that stood for "machine-aided cognition" and "multi-access computer." Fredkin served on Project MAC's steering committee, and in 1966 he began discussing with Minsky the possibility of becoming a visiting professor at MIT. The idea of bringing a college dropout onto the faculty, Minsky recalls, was not as outlandish as it now sounds; computer science had become an academic discipline so suddenly that many of its leading lights possessed meager formal credentials. In 1968, after Licklider had come to MIT and become the director of Project MAC, he and Minsky convinced the head of the electrical-engineering department that Fredkin was worth the gamble.

Fredkin had taught for barely a year before he became a full professor, and not much later, in 1971, he was appointed the head of Project MAC—a position that was also short-lived, for in the fall of 1974 he began a sabbatical at the California Institute of Technology, under the sponsorship of Richard Feynman. The deal, Fredkin recalls, was that he would teach Feynman more about computer science, and Feynman would teach him more about physics. While there, Fredkin developed an idea that has slowly come to be seen as a profound contribution to both disciplines. The idea is also—in Fredkin's mind, at least—corroborating evidence for his theory of digital physics. To put its upshot in brief and therefore obscure terms, Fredkin found that computation is not inherently irreversible and

thus it is possible, in principle, to build a computer that doesn't use up energy and doesn't give off heat.

All computers on the market *are* irreversible. That is, their history of information processing cannot be inferred from their present informational state. You cannot look at the data a computer contains and figure out how it arrived at them. By the time the average computer tells you that 2 plus 2 equals 4, it has forgotten the question; for all it knows, you asked what 1 plus 3 is. The reason for this ignorance is that computers discharge information once it is no longer needed, so that they won't get clogged up.

In 1961 Rolf Landauer, of IBM's Thomas J. Watson Research Center, established that this destruction of information is the only part of the computational process that unavoidably involves the dissipation of energy. It takes effort, in other words, for a computer to forget things but not necessarily for it to perform other functions. Thus the question of whether you can, in principle, build a universal computer that doesn't dissipate energy in the form of heat is synonymous with the question of whether you can design a logically reversible universal computer, one whose computational history can always be unearthed. Landauer, along with just about everyone else, thought such a computer was impossible; all past computer architectures had implied the regular discarding of information. But while at Caltech, Fredkin did one of his favorite things—he showed that everyone had been wrong all along.

Of the two kinds of reversible computers invented by Fredkin, the better known is called the billiard-ball computer. If it were ever actually built, it would consist of billiard balls ricocheting around in a labyrinth of "mirrors," occasionally exiting through doorways that occasionally



would permit new balls to enter. To extract data from the machine, you would superimpose a grid over it, and the machine would constitute information. Such a machine, Fredkin showed, would qualify as a universal computer: it could do anything that normal computers do. But unlike other computers, it would be perfectly reversible; to recover its history, all you would have to do is stop it and run it backward.

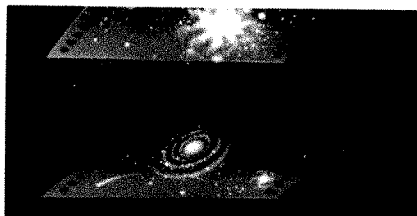
The billiard-ball computer will never be built, because it is a platonic device, existing only in a world of ideals. The balls are perfectly round and hard, and the table perfectly smooth and hard. There is no friction between the two, and no energy is lost when balls collide.

The connection Fredkin sees between the billiard-ball computer and digital physics exemplifies the odd assortment of evidence he has gathered in support of his theory. Molecules and atoms and their constituents, he notes, move around in theoretically reversible fashion, like billiard balls (although it is not humanly possible, of course, actually to take stock of the physical state of the universe and reconstruct history by tracing the motion of microscopic particles backward). Well, he asks, given the theoretical reversibility of physical reality, doesn't the theoretical feasibility of a reversible computer lend credence to the claim that computation is reality's basis?

No and yes. Strictly speaking, Fredkin's theory doesn't demand reversible computation. It is conceivable that an irreversible process at the very core of reality could give rise to the reversible behavior of molecules, atoms, electrons and the rest. After all, irreversible computers (that is, all computers on the market) can simulate reversible billiard balls. But they do so in a convoluted way, Fredkin says, and the connection between an irreversible substratum and a reversible stratum would, similarly, be tortuous—or, as he puts it, "esthetically obnoxious." Fredkin prefers to think that the cellular automaton underly-

ing reversible reality does its work gracefully.

Fredkin cannot give you a single line of reasoning that leads inexorably, or even very plausibly, to the conclusion that the universe is a computer. He can tell you about the reversible computer, about the cellular automaton, about the many physical quantities, like light, that were once thought to be continuous but are now considered discrete, and so on. The evidence consists of many little things—so many, and so little, that in the end he is forced to convey his truth by simile. "I found the supporting evidence for my beliefs in 10,000 different places," he says. "And to me it's just totally overwhelming. It's like there's an animal I want to find. I've found his footprints. I've found his droppings. I've found the half-chewed food. I find pieces of his fur, and so on. In every case it fits one kind of animal, and it's not like any animal anyone's ever seen. People say, Where is this animal? I say, Well, he was here; he's about this big; this, that and the other. And I know a thousand things about him. I don't have him in hand, but I know he's there."



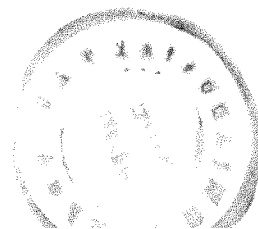
#### DEUS EX MACHINA

There was something bothersome about Isaac Newton's theory of gravitation. The idea that the sun exerts a pull on the Earth, and vice versa, sounded vaguely supernatural and, in any event, was hard to explain. How, after all, could such "action at a distance" be realized? Did the Earth look at the sun, estimate the distance, and consult the law of gravitation to determine where it should move and how fast? Newton sidestepped such

questions. He fudged with the Latin phrase *si esset*: two bodies, he wrote, behave *as if* impelled by a force inversely proportional to the square of their distance. Ever since Newton, physics has followed his example. Its "forces" and "fields" are, strictly speaking, metaphorical, and its laws purely descriptive. Physicists make no attempt to explain why things obey the law of electromagnetism or of gravitation. The law is the law, and that's all there is to it.

Fredkin refuses to accept authority so blindly. He posits not only laws but also a law-enforcement agency: a computer. Somewhere out there, he believes, is a machinelike thing that actually keeps our individual bits of space abiding by the rule of the universal cellular automaton. With this belief Fredkin crosses the line between physics and metaphysics, between scientific hypothesis and cosmic speculation. If Fredkin had Newton's knack for public relations, if he stopped at saying that the universe operates *as if* it were a computer, he could improve his stature among physicists while preserving the essence of his theory—the idea that the dynamics of physical reality will ultimately be better captured by a single recursive algorithm than by the mathematics of conventional physics, and that the continuity of time and space implicit in traditional mathematics is illusory.

Actually, some estimable physicists have lately been saying things not wholly unlike this stripped-down version of the theory. T.D. Lee, a Nobel laureate at Columbia University, has written at length about the possibility that time is discrete. And in 1984 *Scientific American*, not exactly a soapbox for cranks, published an article in which Stephen Wolfram, then of Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, wrote, "Scientific laws are now being viewed as algorithms....Physical systems are viewed as computational systems, processing information much the way computers do." He concluded, "A new paradigm has been born."





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*Why does this giant computer of a universe exist?  
Fredkin explains: 'There is no way to know the answer to some  
question any faster than what's going on.'*

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Why does Fredkin refuse to do the expedient thing—leave out the part about the universe actually *being* a computer? One reason is that he considers reprehensible the failure of Newton, and of all physicists since, to back up their descriptions of nature with explanations. He is amazed to find “perfectly rational scientists” believing in “a form of mysticism: that things just happen because they happen.” The best physics, Fredkin seems to believe, is metaphysics.

The trouble with metaphysics is its endless depth. For every question that is answered, at least one other is raised, and it is not always clear that, on balance, any progress has been made. For example, where is this computer that Fredkin keeps talking about? Is it in this universe, residing along some fifth or sixth dimension that renders it invisible? Is it in some meta-universe? The answer is the latter, apparently, and to understand why, we need to return to the problem of the infinite regress.

The infinite-regress problem afflicts Fredkin's theory in two ways, one of which we have already encountered: if matter is made of information, what is the information made of? And even if one concedes that it is no more ludicrous for information to be the most fundamental stuff than for matter or energy to be the most fundamental stuff, what about the computer itself? What is *it* made of? What energizes it? Who, or what, runs it, or set it in motion to begin with?

When Fredkin is discussing the problem of the infinite regress, his logic seems variously cryptic, evasive and appealing. At one point he says, “For everything in the world where you wonder, ‘What is it made out of?’ the only thing I know of where the question doesn't have to be answered with anything else is for information.” What he means is what follows.

First of all, it doesn't matter what

the information is made of, or what kind of computer produces it. The computer could be of the conventional electronic sort, or it could be a hydraulic machine made of gargantuan sewage pipes and manhole covers, or it could be something we can't even imagine. What's the difference? Who cares what the information consists of? So long as the cellular automaton's rule is the same in each case, the patterns of information will be the same, and so will we, because the structure of our world depends on *pattern*, not on the pattern's substrate; a carbon atom, according to Fredkin, is a certain *configuration* of bits, not a certain *kind* of bits.

Besides we can never know what the information is made of, or what kind of machine is processing it. This point is reminiscent of childhood conversations that Fredkin remembers having with his sister, Joan, about the possibility that they were part of a dream God was having. “Say God is in a room and on his table he has some cookies and tea,” Fredkin says. “And he's dreaming this whole universe up. Well, we can't reach out and get his cookies. They're not in our universe. See, our universe has bounds. There are some things in it and some things not.”

The computer is not in our universe; hardware is beyond the grasp of its software. Imagine a vast computer program that contained bodies of information as complex as people, motivated by bodies of information as complex as ideas. These “people” would have no way of figuring out what kind of computer they owed their existence to, because everything they said, and everything they did—including formulate metaphysical hypotheses—would depend entirely on the programming rules and the original input.

This idea—that sentient beings could be constitutionally numb to the

texture of reality—has fascinated a number of people including, lately, computer scientists. One source of the fascination is the fact that any universal computer can simulate another universal computer, and the simulated computer can, because it is universal, do the same thing. So it is possible to conceive of a theoretically endless series of computers contained, like Russian dolls, in larger versions of themselves and yet oblivious of those containers. To anyone who has lived intimately with and thought deeply about computers, says Charles Bennett, of IBM's Watson Lab, this notion is very attractive. “And if you're too attracted to it, you're likely to part company with the physicists.” Physicists, Bennett says, find heretical the notion that *anything* physical is impervious to experiment, removed from the reach of science.

Fredkin's belief in the limits of scientific knowledge may sound like evidence of humility, but in the end it permits great ambition; it helps him go after some of the grandest philosophical questions around. For example, there is a paradox that crops up whenever people think about how the universe came to be. On the one hand, it must have had a beginning. After all, things usually do. Besides, the cosmological evidence suggests a beginning: the Big Bang. Yet science insists that it is impossible for something to come from nothing; the laws of physics forbid the amount of energy and mass in the universe to change. So how could there have been a time when there was no universe, and thus no mass of energy?

Fredkin escapes from this paradox without breaking a sweat. Granted, he says, the laws of *our* universe don't permit something to come from nothing. But he can imagine laws that would permit such a thing; in fact, he can imagine algorithmic laws that would permit such a thing. The con-



servation of mass and energy is a consequence of our cellular automaton's rules, not a consequence of all possible rules.

What's funny is how hard it is to doubt Fredkin when with such assurance he makes definitive statements about the creation of the universe—or when, for that matter, he looks you in the eye and tells you the universe is a computer. Partly this is because, given the magnitude and intractability of the questions he is addressing, his answers aren't all that bad.

Still, as he gets further from physics, and more deeply into philosophy, he begins to try one's trust. For example, having tackled the question of what sort of process could generate a universe in which spontaneous generation is impossible, he aims immediately for bigger game: *why* was the universe created? Why is there something here instead of nothing?

When this subject comes up, Fredkin is in his villa talking about an interesting characteristic of some computer programs, including many cellular automata: there is no shortcut to finding out what they will lead to. This, indeed, is a basic difference between the "analytical" approach associated with traditional mathematics, including differential equations, and the "computational" approach associated with algorithms. You can predict a future state of a system susceptible to the analytic approach without figuring out what states it will occupy between now and then, but in the case of many cellular automata, you must go through all the intermediate states to find out what the end will be like: there is no way to know the future except to watch it unfold.

This indeterminacy is very suggestive. To Fredkin, it suggests that even if human behavior is entirely determined, entirely inevitable, it may be unpredictable; there is room for "pseudo free will" in a completely mechanistic universe. But on this particular evening Fredkin is interested mainly in cosmogony, in the implica-

tions of this indeterminacy for the big question: why does this giant computer of a universe exist?

It's simple, Fredkin explains: "The reason is, there is no way to know the answer to some question any faster than what's going on."

Aware that he may have said something enigmatic, Fredkin elaborates. Suppose, he says, that there is an all-powerful God. "And he's thinking of creating this universe. He's going to spend seven days on the job—this is totally allegorical. OK, now, if he's as all-powerful as you might imagine, he can say to himself, 'Wait a minute, why waste the time? I can create the whole thing, or I can just think about it for a minute and just realize what's going to happen so that I don't have to bother.' Now, ordinary physics says, Well, yeah, you got an all-powerful God, he can probably do that. What I can say is—this is very interesting—I can say I don't care how powerful God is; he cannot know the answer to the question any faster than doing it. Now, he can have various ways of doing it, but he has to do every single step with every bit or he won't get the right answer. There's no shortcut."

Around sundown on Fredkin's island all kinds of insects start chirping or buzzing or whirring. It is one of those moments when the context you've constructed falls apart, and gives way to a new, considerably stranger one. The old context in this case was that Fredkin is an iconoclastic thinker who believes that space and time are discrete, that the laws of the universe are algorithms, and that the universe works according to the same principles as a computer (he uses this phrasing in his circumspect moments). The new context is that Fredkin believes that the universe is very literally a computer and that it is being used by someone, or something, to solve a problem. It sounds like a good-news/bad-news joke: the good news is that our lives have purpose; the bad news is that the purpose is to help some remote hacker esti-

mate pi to nine jillion decimal places.

So, I say to Fredkin, you're arguing that the reason we're here is that some being wanted to theorize about reality, and the only way he could test his theories was to create reality? "No, you see, my explanation is much more abstract. I don't imagine there is a being or anything. I'm just using that to talk to you about it. What I'm saying is that there is no way to know what the future is any faster than running this (the universe) to get to that (the future). Therefore, what I'm assuming is that there is a question and there is an answer, OK? I don't make any assumptions about who has the question, who wants the answer, anything."

But the more we talk, the closer Fredkin comes to the religious undercurrents he's trying to avoid. "I guess what I'm saying is—I don't have any religious belief. I don't know what there is or might be. But what I can say is that it seems likely to me that this particular universe we have is a consequence of something I would call intelligence." Does he mean that there's something out there that wanted to get the answer to a question? "Yeah." Something that set up the universe to see what would happen? "In some way, yes."

Fredkin's erratic, hybrid education has left him with a mixture of terminology that neither computer scientists nor physicists recognize as their native tongue. Further, he is not schooled in the rules of scientific discourse; he seems just barely aware of the line between scientific hypothesis and philosophical speculation. He is not politic enough to confine his argument to its essence: that time and space are discrete, and the state of every point in space at any point in time is determined by an algorithm. In short, the very background that has allowed Fredkin to see the universe as a computer seems to prevent him from sharing his vision. If he could talk like other scientists, he might see only the things that they see. ♦



# THE WRITER LECTURES

By John Updike

One of America's most acclaimed writers ruminates on why novelists accept the many invitations to speak to a live audience.

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*In the past many writers enhanced their reputations by traveling and lecturing on a variety of public issues. Mark Twain, for example, entertained huge audiences with his populist wit during a world tour in the 1890s. In today's age of television and mass advertising novelists do not have to range widely to become well known, yet the tradition of public lectures persists, especially on college campuses. In this essay John Updike discusses the phenomenon of the novelist at the podium. "A writer," he says, "needs to make contact with his nation; his work in a sense is one long lecture to his fellow countrymen, asking them to face up to his version of what his life and their lives are like."*

*Novelist, critic, short-story writer, poet, essayist and dramatist, John Updike is the author of more than 30 books, including 13 novels. Updike is also the recipient of every major American literary prize, including the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. His fiction is praised for capturing and preserving middle-class life, its attendant rituals and occasional epiphanies. Fellow novelist John Cheever called Updike "the most brilliant and versatile writer of his generation."*

**T**he very first people whom we consider authors—the minds and voices behind the tribal epics, the Bible and Homer, the Vedas and the sagas—were, it would seem, public performers, for whom publication took the form of recitation, of incantation, of (we might say) lecturing. The circumstances wherein these primal literary works were promulgated are not perfectly clear, nor are all examples of oral literature identical in purpose and texture; but we could risk generalizing that the bard's function was, in the Horatian formulation, to entertain and to instruct, and that the instruction concerned the great matter of tribal identity. The poet and his songs served as a memory bank, supplying the outlines of the determinative tribal struggles and instances of warrior valor. Who we are, who our heroic fathers were, how we got where we are, why we believe what we believe and act the way we do—the bard illuminates these essential questions, as the fire-light flickers and the mead flows and the listeners in their hearts renew their pact with the past. The author, himself, is delivering not his own words but his own version of a story told to him, a story handed down in an evolving form and, at a certain point, fixed into print by the written version of a scribe.

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The author is not only himself but his predecessors, and simultaneously he is part of the living tribal fabric, the part that voices what all know, or should know, and need to hear again.

The mnemonic function of poetry weakly persists in certain helpful rhymes ("Thirty days hath September," etc.), and the traditional, even sacred centrality of the bard at the tribal conference lingers in the widely held notion that authors can "speak"—that their vocation includes an ability and a willingness to entertain and instruct, orally, any gathering where the mead flows and ring-gold is exchanged in sufficient quantities. The assumption is flattering but in truth the modernist literary tradition, of which we are all, for lack of another, late and laggard heirs, ill prepares a writer for such a performance. James Joyce evidently had a fine tenor voice and loved to sing, and he also, inspired by enough mead, could kick as high as the lintel of a doorway; but Proust was of a thoroughly retiring and unathletic nature, and murmured mostly to himself. "Authentic art has no use for proclamations, it accomplishes its work in silence," he wrote, in that long meditation upon the writer's task which concludes *Remembrance of Things Past*. "To be altogether true to his spiritual life an artist must remain alone and not be prodigal of himself even to disciples" is another of his strictures. The artist, he repeatedly insists, is not another citizen, a social creature with social duties; he is a solitary explorer, a pure egotist. In a great parenthesis he explains that "when human altruism is not egotistic it is sterile, as for instance in the writer who interrupts his work to visit an unfortunate friend, to accept a public function, or to write propaganda articles."

In almost the exact middle of *Time Regained*, Marcel contemplates his task—the huge novel we have at this point almost read through—and quails at a prospect so grand and exalted. He has stumbled upon the uneven paving stones that have recalled Venice to him, has heard the clink of the spoon upon glass that has reminded him of the train journey on which he had observed the steeples of Martinville, has felt the texture of the stiff napkin that has reminded him of Bal-

bec and its beach and ocean; he has tasted the madeleine out of which bloomed all Combray, and sees that these fragments involuntarily recovered from the abyss of Time compose the truth he must deliver:

Beneath these signs there lay something of a quite different kind which I must try to discover, some thought which they translated after the fashion of those hieroglyphic characters which at first one might suppose to represent only material objects. No doubt the process of decipherment was difficult, but only by accomplishing it could one arrive at whatever truth there was to read. For the truths which the intellect apprehends directly in the world of full and unimpeded light have something less profound, less necessary than those which life communicates to us against our will in an impression which is material because it enters us through the senses but yet has a spiritual meaning which is possible for us to extract.

This extraction of meaning, from tactile hieroglyphs, becomes on the next page an underwater groping:

As for the inner book of unknown symbols (symbols carved in relief they might have been, which my attention, as it explored my unconscious, groped for and stumbled against and followed the contours of, like a diver exploring the oceanbed), if I tried to read them no one could help me with any rules, for to read them was an act of creation in which no one can do our work for us or even collaborate with us. How many for this reason turn aside from writing! What tasks do men not take upon themselves in order to evade this task! Every public event, be it the Dreyfus affair, be it the war, furnishes the writer with a fresh excuse for not attempting to decipher this

book: he wants to ensure the triumph of justice, he wants to restore the moral unity of the nation, he has no time to think of literature. But these are mere excuses, the truth being that he has not or no longer has genius, that is to say instinct. For instinct dictates our duty and the intellect supplies us with pretexts for evading it. But excuses have no place in art and intentions count for nothing: at every moment the artist has to listen to his instinct, and it is this that makes art the most real of all things, the most austere school of life, the true last judgment.

The religious tone of classic modernism, its austerity and fanaticism, strikes us as excessive. Its close imitation of European Catholicism seems puzzling, now that the vessel of Christianity is a century more depleted. Virtue and vice alike have been trivialized into news. What do the emanations from the ivory tower count against those from the television transmitting tower? This phrase *ivory tower* was proposed by Flaubert, the first modernist novelist, when he wrote,

Between the crowd and ourself, no bond exists. Alas for the crowd; alas for us, especially. But since the fancy of one individual seems to me just as valid as the appetite of a million men, and can occupy an equal place in the world, we must (regardless of material things and of mankind, which disavows us) live for our vocation, climb up our ivory tower and there, like a bayadere with her perfumes, dwell alone with our dreams.

The artist's only possible camaraderie, Flaubert elsewhere asserts, can be with other artists. "Mankind hates us: we serve none of its purposes; and we hate it, because it injures us. So let us love one another 'in Art,' as mystics love one another 'in God.'" God much haunts his mind, as in the famous dictum, "An author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere." God does not lecture, except to the Old Testament Israelites, who did not



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*Lectures by authors go back, in the United States, to the Lyceum Circuit, which, beginning in the 1830s, brought to the vastly scattered American provinces inspirational speakers. Ralph Waldo Emerson was such a star, and his oral essays are among the classic texts of American style and thought.*

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always listen. The modernist writer does not lecture; he creates, he dreams, he deciphers his hieroglyphs, he exists in a state of conscious antagonism to the busy bourgeois world. The lecture is an instrument of the bourgeoisie, a tool in the mass education essential to modern democracies. Where Flaubert says that no bond exists between the crowd and literary artists, the crowd offers to make one and invites the writer to lecture. "Descend from your ivory tower," the crowd cries, "and come share. O bayadere, your fabulous perfumes with us." Godlike and savage in his purest conception of himself, the author is thus brought back into society, into the global village, and trivialized into being an educator and a celebrity.

Lectures by authors go back, in the United States, to the so-called Lyceum Circuit, which, beginning in the 1830s, brought to the vastly scattered American provinces inspirational and educational speakers. Ralph Waldo Emerson was such a star, hitting the road with secular sermons culled from his journals, and then collecting these oral gems into the volumes of essays that are among the classic texts of American style and thought. Mark Twain, a generation and a half later, began as a comic lecturer, a stand-up comedian without a microphone, and his best-selling novels and travel accounts retained much of the crowd-pleasing platform manner.

Even writers one thinks of as relatively abstruse and shy at one point or other followed the lecture trail; Henry James toured the United States coast to coast in 1904 and 1905 lecturing on "The Lesson of Balzac," and Melville for a time in the late 1850s,

when he was still somewhat famous as "the man who had lived among cannibals," sought to generate the income that his books were increasingly failing to supply by speaking, at fifty dollars a lecture, on "Statues in Rome" and "The South Seas." Even in its heyday the Lyceum style of bardic enterprise had its detractors among literary men: Hawthorne wrote in *The Blithedale Romance* of "that sober and pallid, or, rather, drab-colored, mode of winter-evening entertainment, the Lecture"; and Oliver Wendell Holmes returned from a tour reporting that "a lecturer was a literary strumpet."

Yet as one tries to picture those gaslit auditoriums of the last century, with the black-clad lecturer and his oaken lectern framed by velvet curtains heavy with gold tassels—curtains that the next night might part to reveal a scuffed and much-traveled opera set or the chairs of a minstrel show—one imagines an audience and a performer in sufficient agreement on what constituted entertainment and edification; the bonds between the culture-hungry and the culture-dispensing were stretched thin but not yet broken in the innocence of the New World wilderness. One thinks of the tremendous warmth Emerson established with his auditors, to whom he entrusted, without condescension or clowning, his most profound and intimate thoughts, and who in listening found themselves discovering, with him, what it was to be American. Even a figure as eccentric and suspect as Whitman traveled about evidently, with a lecture on Lincoln.

Like book clubs and other movements of mass uplift, the lecture circuit gradually gravitated toward the

lowbrow. The famous Chautauqua Movement, which persisted into the 1920s, blended with camp meetings and tent revival meetings—each a high-minded excuse to gather, with the usual mixed motives of human gatherings. The writers most admired in my youth did not, by and large, lecture, though some of the less admired and more personable did, such as the then-ubiquitous John Mason Brown and Franklin P. Adams. But Hemingway and Faulkner and Fitzgerald and Steinbeck and Sinclair Lewis were rarely seen on stages; their advice to humanity was contained in their works, and their non-writing time seemed amply filled with marlin fishing, mule and bull fancying, and recreational drinking.

They were, by and large, a rather rough-hewn crew, adventurers and knockabouts who had trained for creative writing by practicing journalism. Few were college graduates, though Fitzgerald's years at Princeton were important to him and Lewis and Thornton Wilder had degrees from Yale. But doing was accepted as the main mode of learning. Hemingway began as a reporter for the *Kansas City Star* at the age of 18, and at the age of 19 Eugene O'Neill quit Princeton and shipped out to sea. The world of print was wider then; a major American city might have as many as eight or 10 daily newspapers, and a number of popular magazines paid well for short stories. The writers of this pretelevision generation, with their potentially large bourgeois audience, yet were modernist enough to shy away from crowd-pleasing personal appearances; nor, in the matter of lecturing, is there much reason to suppose that they were often invited.



Why would the citizens of Main Street want to hear what Sinclair Lewis thought of them? Gertrude Stein, of all people, went on a nationwide lecture tour in 1934, speaking in her complacently repetitive and cryptic style on such topics as "What Is English Literature?," "The Gradual Making of the Making of the Americans" and "Portraits and Repetition." One suspects, though, that the audiences came to hear her much as they had flocked to hear Oscar Wilde—more for the spectacle than the sense, and to be titillated by the apparition of the writer as an amusing exotic.

**I**n the United States, the four decades since the end of World War II have seen the reduction of literary artists to the status of academic adjuncts. Where creation is taken as a precondition for exposition, the creator is expected to be, in Proust's phrase, "prodigal of himself." It is not merely that poets out of economic necessity teach in colleges and in time understandably take as a standard of excellence a poem's impact upon a basically adolescent audience; or that short-story writers move from college writing program to summer workshop and back again and consider actual publication a kind of supplementary academic credential, and a karmic turnover of writing students into graduate writing students into writing teachers takes place within an academic universe sustained by grants and tax money and isolated from the marketplace and popular awareness. It is not merely that contemporary novels are studied for course credit and thus given the onus of the compulsory and, as it were, the textbook-directed—a modernization of the literary curriculum, one might

remark, that displaces the classics and gives the present a kind of instant dustiness. It is that American society, generously trying to find a place for this functionary, inherited from other epochs, called a writer, can only think to place him as a teacher and, in a lesser way, as a celebrity.

He is invited to come onto television and have his say, as if his book, his poor thick unread book, were *not* his say. He is invited to come into the classroom and, the meagerest kind of expert, teach himself. Last century's Lyceum Circuit has moved indoors, from the open air of a hopeful rural democracy to the cloistered auditoriums of the country's 1500 accredited colleges and universities; the circuit has been, as it were, miniaturized. Though the market for actual short stories is down, in the vastness of the United States, to a half-dozen or so paying magazines, the market for fiction writers, as adornment to banquets and conferences and corporate self-celebration, is booming. Kurt Vonnegut has observed that an American writer gets paid more for delivering a speech at a third-rate bankrupt college than he does for writing a short-story masterpiece. Even I, a relatively obscure and marginally best-selling writer, receive almost every day an invitation to speak, to "read," to lecture.

I do not wish to complain or to exaggerate. Sociological situations have causes that are not altered by satire or nostalgia. The university and the print shop, literature and scholarship have been ever close, and the erratic ways in which writers support themselves and their books seek readers have changed a number of times since the Renaissance days when poets sought with fulsome dedications to win the support of noble patrons. The academicization of writing in America is but an aspect, after all, of the academicization of America. The typical writer of my generation is college-educated; in fact I am rather a maverick in having avoided graduate school and not possessing an advanced de-

gree. Academically equipped and habituated, John Barth and Joyce Carol Oates, for instance, naturally are drawn to teach and to lecture. They know a lot, and the prestige of their authorship adds a magic shimmer, a raffish spin, to their knowledge. Writers such as they stand ready to participate in the discourse of civilized men and women, just as, in prewar Europe, writers like Mann and Valéry and Eliot could creditably perform in the company of scholarly gentlemen.

Until the arising, not so many centuries ago, of a large bourgeois audience for printed material and with it the possibility of professional writers supported by the sales of their works, writers had to be gentlemen or daughters of clergymen or courtiers of a kind; like jesters, writers peeked from behind the elbow of power, and if, in a democracy without a nobility or much of a landed gentry, the well-endowed universities, as the bourgeois audience ebbs, step in and act the part of patron, where is the blame? Who longs for the absinthe-soaked bohemia that offered along with its freedom and excitement derangement and despair, or for the barren cultural landscape that so grudgingly fed the classic American artists? Is not even the greatest American writing, from Hawthorne and Dickinson to Hemingway and Faulkner, and not excluding Whitman and Twain, maimed by the oddity of the native artist's position and the limits of self-education? Perhaps so; but we suspect in each of the cases that the oddity is inextricable from the intensity and veracity, and that when the writer becomes a lecturer, a certain intensity is lost.

Why should this be so? To prepare and give a lecture, and to observe the attendant courtesies, takes time; but time is given abundantly to the writer, especially in this day of antibiotics and health consciousness, more time than he or she needs to be struck by his or her particular lightning. There was time enough, in the life of Wallace Stevens, to put in eight-hour days at his insurance company in Hartford;



*A mark of a great writer, as Walt Whitman observed, is that a nation absorbs him, or her, in its self-knowledge and self-image. The confident writer assumes that his own sensibility is a sufficient index of general questions, and that the question 'Who am I?' illuminates the question 'Who are we?'*

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time enough, in the life of Rimbaud, to quit poetry at the age of 19; time enough, in the life of Tolstoy, to spurn art entirely and try to educate the peasants and reinvent religion. We feel, in fact, that if a writer's life does not have in it time to waste—time for a binge or a walk in the woods or a hectic affair or a year of silence—he can't be much of a writer. While paint and music possess something like an absolute existence, language is nonsense without its referents, which exist in nature. A writer serves as an interface between language and nature. In a sense none of his time is wasted, except that in which he turns his back on nature, shuts down his osmotic function and tries to lecture.

Asking a writer to lecture is like asking a knife to turn a screw. Screws are necessary to hold the world together, the tighter the better, and a screwdriver is an admirable tool, more rugged and versatile and less dangerous than a knife; but a knife with a broken tip and dulled or twisted edge serves all purposes poorly. Of course, if a knife is repeatedly used as a screwdriver, it will get worn into the shape of one; but then don't expect it to slice any more apples.

Perhaps, in this electronic age, one should attempt to speak of input and output and static. Invited to lecture, the writer is flattered. He feels invited up, after years of playing on the floor with paper dolls and pretend castles, into grown-up activity, for which one wears a suit, and receives money or at least an airplane ticket. He furthermore receives society's permission, by the terms of the contract, to immobilize an audience of some hundreds or at least dozens of fellow human be-

ings. I must be, he can only conclude, an interesting and worthy person. With this thought, on this particular frequency, static enters the wave bands where formerly he was only hearing the rustle of paper dolls—static, alas, that may be slow to clear up. Input and output are hard to manage simultaneously. A writer on show tends not to see or hear much beyond his own performance. A writer whose thinking has become thoroughly judgmental, frontal and reasonable is apt to find his creative processes clogged.



work of fiction is not a statement about the world; it is an attempt to create, out of hieroglyphs imprinted by the world upon the ego of the writer, another world. The kind of precision demanded concerns how something would be said, how someone or something would look, or how closely the rhythm of a paragraph suggests the atmosphere of a moment. The activity feels holy, and is attempted with much nervousness and inner and outer circling, and consummated with a sense of triumph out of all apparent proportion to the trivial or even tawdry reality that has been verbally approximated. Compared to such precision, everything that can be said in a lecture feels only somewhat true, and significantly corrupt. All assertions feel rash, and

all generalizations arguable. Lecturing deprives the author of his sacred right to silence, of speaking only on the firm ground of the imaginary. For the mind whose linguistic habits have been shaped by the work of embodiment, assertions, however subtly and justly turned, are a self-violation, and if the violation is public, as a lecture is, the occasion partakes of disgrace—of confession that one has deserted one's post, has forsaken one's task for a lesser, however richly society has wrapped the occasion in plausibility and approval.

But how understandable it is, after all, for society to assume that the writer has something to say. To assume the opposite—that the writer has nothing to say—seems scandalous, though it is somewhat true, at least to the degree that we all have nothing to say, relative to the immense amount of saying that gets done. Most human utterance is not communication but a noise, a noise that says, "I am here"—a noise that says, "You are not alone." The value, for the author, of a lecture is that he confesses, by giving one, that he too needs to make this noise, that he is a member of society, that he is human. The Flaubertian pose of God the creator ("paring his fingernails," James Joyce added in a famous specification—"within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails") yields in these postmodern times to the pose of a talkative good fellow, a fellow speaker, contributing his bit to the chatter that staves off the silence that surrounds us as we huddle around the tribal fire.

Giving a lecture gets the writer out



into the world, and in its moment of delivery enables him to taste the ancient bardic role. It confronts him with an audience, and healthily deprives him of the illusion that he is his own audience, that his making, like the Lord's, takes place in a void. In the literary art, however abstruse or imagist, surreal or impersonal, communication is hoped for, and communication implies the attempt to alter other minds. This is the shameful secret, the tyrannical impulse, hidden behind the modernist pose of self-satisfying creation. A Western writer who has traveled even a little in the Third World has encountered the solemn, aggressive question, "What is the writer's social purpose? How do you serve your fellow men?" It seems embarrassing and inadequate to reply honestly that—if one is a fiction writer—one serves them by constructing fantastic versions of one's own life, spinoffs from the personal into the just barely possible, into the amusingly elaborate. Giving a lecture reminds the writer of another dimension of his task, that of making contact—"our terrible need to make contact," in Katherine Mansfield's great phrase. A writer needs to make contact with his nation; his work in a sense is one long lecture to his fellow countrymen, asking them to face up to his version of what his life and their lives are like—asking them, even, to do something about it.

The very book, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, that contains the description of the godlike artist paring his fingernails ends with this altruistic vow of the hero, Stephen Dedalus, Stephen the artificer: "Welcome, O Life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." The authorial interface, by this formulation, is between the reality of experience and the race, whose conscience and consciousness must be, repeatedly, created. Certainly Joyce's emotional and esthetic loyalty to an Ireland where he couldn't bear to live

is clear enough, as is his attempt, in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, the two long and unique novels that succeeded *Portrait of the Artist*, to re-create the bardic persona—to sing, that is, in epic form, the entire history of his city and nation. And Proust, too, amid the magnificent unscrolling of his own snobbish and hyperesthetic life, sings hymns to French cathedrals, French place names and the visions of French history. Kafka, doubly alien, as a German-speaking Jew within a Czech-speaking province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and a writer furthermore for whom publication was a kind of desecration, yet has the epic touch; his parables of rootlessness are securely rooted in the landscape and civic machinery of Bohemia and Prague, where he is still revered as a national prophet.

One could go on with this catalog of tribal resonances, for a mark of a great writer, as Walt Whitman observed, is that a nation absorbs him, or her, in its self-knowledge and self-image. The confident writer assumes that his own sensibility is a sufficient index of general conditions, and that the question "Who am I?" if bravely enough explored, inevitably illuminates the question "Who are we?"

But if giving a lecture calls the writer down from his ivory tower and administers a healthy dose of humanity, what benefit does the audience receive? Why invite this person to give a type of performance he is instinctively reluctant to give, and does not give very well? Thomas Mann, in preparing the way for his own lecture on Freud, gracefully suggested that the author is especially called to celebrations, for "he has understanding of the feasts of life, understanding even of life as a feast." I would suggest, furthermore, that feasts traditionally require, within their apparatus, a figure of admonition, a licensed representative, sometimes costumed as a skeleton and wearing a grinning skull-mask, of those dark forces that must be acknowledged before the feast can be wholly enjoyed. It used to be that in

America, at even the gayest of celebrations—at weddings, say, or at the opening of a new automobile agency—a clergyman, dressed in chastening black, would stand and, with his few words and declared presence, like a lightning rod carry off all the guilt and foreboding that might otherwise cloud the occasion, and thus release the celebrants to joy.

As the Church's power to generate and discharge guilt fades, the writer, I suggest—the representative of the dark and inky world of print—has replaced the priest as an admonitory figure. In this electronic age, when everyone is watching television and even book critics (as Leslie Fiedler has confided) would rather go to the movies, books make us feel guilty—so many classics gathering dust unread, so many new books piling up in bright heaps, and above this choking wasteland of print the plaintive cries of sociologists waving fistfuls of tabulated secondary-school tests and shrieking to us how totally illiterate we are all becoming. Gutenberg is dead, but his ghost moves among us as a reproachful specter. What better exorcism, that the feast of life may tumble on untroubled, than to invite a writer to lecture?



# BEING THERE, WRITING HERE

By Clifford Geertz

The new role of anthropology will be to help improve communication across many different societal lines: ethnicity, religion, class, gender, language, race.

Clifford Geertz, probably the most famous American anthropologist today, has revolutionized the way that profession writes about what it does. A century ago, the energies that created anthropology were connected with two phenomena—the expansion of the West and the rise of a salvational belief in the powers of science. In the past 20 years, however, as the benefits of both science and Western culture have been called into question, anthropologists have begun to rethink their role. Geertz comments on this rethinking: “The end of colonialism altered radically the nature of the social relationship between those who ask and look and those who are asked and looked at.”

What, then, are anthropologists to do from now on? A more important task than ever—helping the people of the world get along with each other by enhancing “cross-cultural communication” in the broadest sense. Their new role, says Geertz, will be “to enlarge the possibility of intelligible discourse between people quite different from one another in interest, outlook, wealth and power, and yet contained in a world where, tumbled as they are into endless connection, it is increasingly difficult to get out of each other’s way.”

Clifford Geertz is a professor of social science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. Among his best-known works are *The Religion of Java* (1960), *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) and *Local Knowledge* (1983). The following article is adapted and abridged from two chapters in his most recent book, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, an analysis of the writing styles of four great ethnographers: Claude Lévi-Strauss, Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, Bronislaw Malinowski and Ruth Benedict.

*Right away this afternoon I go with Abba Jérôme to see [the Ethiopian woman] Emawayish and give her pens, ink and a notebook so she can record for herself—or dictate to her son—the manuscript [of her songs], letting it be understood that the head of the expedition, if he is pleased, will present her with the desired gift.*

*Emawayish’s words this afternoon when I told her, speaking of her manuscript, that it would be especially good for her to write down some love songs like those of the other night: does poetry exist in France? And then: does love exist in France?*

*From “Phantom Africa” (1934)  
by Michel Leiris, in Sulfur, No. 15*

However far from the groves of academe anthropologists seek out their subjects—a shelved beach in Polynesia, a charred plateau in Amazonia—they write their accounts with the world of lecterns, libraries, blackboards and seminars all about them. This is the world that produces anthropologists, that licenses them to do the kind of work they do, and within which the kind of work they do must find a place if it is to count as worth attention. In itself, *Being There* is a postcard experience, which after all demands at the minimum hardly more than a travel booking, a willingness to endure a certain amount of loneliness and physical hardship, and the sort of patience that can support an endless search for invisible needles in infinite haystacks. It is *Being Here*, a scholar among scholars, that gets your anthropology read...published, reviewed, cited, taught.

The ability of anthropologists to get us to take what they say seriously

has less to do with either a factual look or an air of conceptual elegance than it has with their capacity to convince us that what they say is a result of their having actually penetrated (or, if you prefer, having been penetrated by) another form of life, of having, one way or another, truly “been there.” And that, persuading us that this off-stage miracle has occurred, is where the writing comes in.

The fact that almost all ethnographers are university types of one sort or another is so familiar as to confound the thought that matters might be otherwise. However, the incongruities implicit in such a divided existence—a few years, now and again, scuffling about with cattle herders or yam gardeners, a lifetime lecturing to classes and arguing with colleagues—have recently begun to be more sharply felt. The gap between engaging others where they are and representing them where they aren’t, always immense but not much noticed, has suddenly become extremely visible. What seemed to the great anthropologists of the first half of this century only technically difficult, getting

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Clifford Geertz. Photograph by Robert Werber.





*Both the world that anthropologists for the most part study—once called primitive or traditional, now emergent—and the one that they study it from—academia—have vastly changed.*

“their” lives into “our” works, has turned morally, politically, even epistemologically, delicate. The *suffisance* of Lévi-Strauss, the assuredness of Evans-Pritchard, the brashness of Malinowski, and the imperturbability of Benedict seem very far away.

What is at hand is a pervasive nervousness about the whole business of claiming to explain enigmatical others on the grounds that you have gone about with them in their native habitat or combed the writings of those who have. The Emawayish question now is everywhere: what happens to reality when it is shipped abroad?

**B**oth the world that anthropologists for the most part study, which once was called primitive, tribal, traditional or folk and now is called emergent, modernizing, peripheral or submerged, and the one that they for the most part study it from, academia, have vastly changed. The end of colonialism altered radically the nature of the social relationship between those who ask and look and those who are asked and looked at. The decline of faith in brute fact, set procedures and unsituated knowledge in the human sciences, and indeed in scholarship generally, altered no less radically the askers’ and lookers’ conception of what it was they were trying to do. Imperialism in its classical form, metropolises and possessions, and Scientism in its, impusions and billiard balls, fell at the same time. Things have been less simple since, on both the Being There and the Being Here sides of the anthropological equation, an equation First World trinkets and Third World songs now more mock than balance.

The transformation, partly juridical, partly ideological, partly real, of the people anthropologists mostly write about, from colonial subject to sovereign citizens, has altered entirely the moral context within which the

ethnographical act takes place. Even those exemplary elsewhere—Lévi-Strauss’s Amazon or Benedict’s Japan—that were not colonies, but stranded hinterlands or closed-off empires “in the middle of the sea,” stand in a quite different light since the Indian subcontinent’s partition, Suez and Vietnam changed the political grammar of the world. The more recent scattering of encapsulated peoples across the globe—Algerians in France, Koreans in Kuwait, Pakistanis in London, Cubans in Miami—has only extended the process by reducing the spacing of variant turns of mind, as has, of course, jet-plane tourism as well. One of the major assumptions upon which anthropological writing rested until only yesterday, that its subjects and its audience were not only separable but morally disconnected, that the first were to be described but not addressed, the second informed but not implicated, has fairly well dissolved. The world has its compartments still, but the passages between them are much more numerous and much less well secured.

This inter-confusion of object and audience, as though Gibbon were to find himself suddenly with a Roman readership, leaves contemporary anthropologists in some uncertainty as to rhetorical aim. Who is now to be persuaded? Africanists or Africans? Americanists or American Indians? Japanologists or Japanese? And of what: factual accuracy? Theoretical sweep? Imaginative grasp? Moral depth? It is easy enough to answer, “All of the above.” It is not quite so easy to produce a text that thus responds.

Indeed, the very right to write—to write ethnography—seems at risk. The entrance of once colonized or

castaway peoples (wearing their own masks, speaking their own lines) onto the stage of global economy, international high politics and world culture has made the claim of the anthropologist to be a tribune for the unheard, a representer of the unseen, a kenner of the misconstrued, increasingly difficult to sustain. Malinowski’s happy “Eureka!” when first coming upon the Trobriand Islanders in the South Pacific—“Feeling of ownership: it is I who will describe them...[I who will] create them”—sounds in a world of OPEC, ASEAN, African paperbacks sold in Western airports and Tongan running backs with American football teams (as well as one of Yoruban, Sinhalese and Tewa anthropologists) not merely presumptuous, but outright comic. “[What] has become irreducibly curious,” the meta-ethnographer James Clifford has written (though perhaps what he meant to say was “dubious”), “is no longer the other, but cultural description itself.”

It has become curious (or dubious, or exploitative, or oppressive, or brutal—the adjectives escalate) because most anthropologists now writing find themselves in a profession that was largely formed in a historical context—the Colonial Encounter—of which they have no experience and want none. The desire to distance themselves from the power asymmetries upon which that encounter rested, in anthropology as in everything else (and which, however changed in form, have hardly disappeared) is generally quite strong, sometimes overmastering, and produces an attitude toward the very idea of ethnography at least ambivalent.

All of this is made the more dire, leading to distracted cries of plight and crisis, by the fact that at the same time as the moral foundations of ethnography have been shaken by decolonization on the Being There side, its epistemological foundations have been shaken by a general loss of faith in received stories about the nature of representation, ethnographic or any other, on the Being Here side. Confronted, in the academy, by a sudden explosion of polemical prefixes (neo-, post-, meta-, anti-) and subversive title forms (*After Virtue*, *Against Method*, *Beyond Belief*), anthropologists have had added to their “Is it decent?” wor-



# THE OBSERVER OBSERVED

By Godfrey Lienhardt

*The following excerpt is from Godfrey Lienhardt's review of Works and Lives in The Times Literary Supplement. Lienhardt is reader emeritus in social anthropology at the University of Oxford.*

Clifford Geertz is well known for his interest in the ambivalent role of anthropologists as go-betweens for the people they study and the people they write for. *The Interpretation of Cultures*, a representative collection of his essays published in the early 1970s, was largely concerned with such anthropological hermeneutics. *Works and Lives* is a study of four eminent anthropologists, Lévi-Strauss, Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski and Ruth Benedict. What is it, Geertz asks, that has given these authors' books their reputation as classics of their kind?

It is certainly not their ethnographic content alone, in which some are far richer than others. Geertz at once dismisses any idea that "what a proper ethnographer ought properly to be doing is going out to places, coming back with information about how people live there, and making that information available to the professional community in practical form." This is not how influential anthropologists have made the peoples they happened to study so much more widely known than many others intrinsically no less remarkable. Neither detailed empirical research nor analytic subtlety in itself is enough to persuade a wide range of readers that once-remote Amazonian Indians, southern Sudanese or Melanesians are of intellectual and moral importance to them. Such success requires superior "literary strategies," the personal stylistic imprint of the authors on their texts; and thus, though anthropologists over-anxious to protect their subjects' scientific status may prefer to deny it, the best ethnographic writing is primarily a form of literary art. Such in outline is the main thrust of *Works and Lives*.

Geertz will not convince all his anthropological colleagues that "the separation of what someone says from how they say it...is as mischievous in anthropology as it is in poetry, painting or political oratory." Yet Geertz's own style "somehow" (as he often says) disarms criticism at the same time as intending to stimulate it. He diagnoses "grave inner uncertainties, amounting almost to a sort of epistemological hypochondria" in anthropologists today, and suggests how they may alleviate them—in the main by accepting themselves modestly for what they are, hybrids from the arts and the sciences, neither one thing nor another. ♦

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hardly more adequate a slogan for ethnography than for philosophy since Ludwig Wittgenstein, history since Robin Collingwood, politics since Michel Foucault or physics since Thomas Kuhn. The inadequacy of words to experience, and their tendency to lead off only into other words, has been something both poets and mathematicians long have known; but it is rather a new discovery so far as ethnographers are concerned, and it has put them, or some of them, into something of a disarray.

Whether the period immediately ahead leads to a renewal of the discursive energies of anthropology or to their dissipation, a recovery of authorial nerve or its loss, depends on whether the field (or, more exactly, its would-be practitioners) can adjust itself to a situation in which its goals, its relevance, its motives and its procedures all are questioned. Lévi-Strauss, Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski, Benedict and a number of others at least as consequential—ethnography's *founders of discursivity*, to use Foucault's term, authors who have produced not just their own works, but in doing so "have produced something else: the possibilities and rules for the formation of other texts"—themselves had enormous problems of formulation and persuasion to overcome; the suspension of disbelief has never here been particularly willing. But they were spared much in the way of assaults upon the justifiability of their enterprise, or upon the sheer possibility of carrying it out. What they were doing may have been odd, but it was admirable, may have been difficult, but it could to some reasonable level be accomplished. To write ethnography now is to write in the realization that such presuppositions are dead, both in author and audience.

Half-convinced writers trying to half-convince readers of their (the writers') half-convictions would not on the face of it seem an especially favorable situation for the production of works of very much power, ones that could, whatever their failings, do what those of earlier generations of ethnographers clearly did: enlarge the sense of how life can go. Yet that is what must happen if the business is to continue; and if either mere digging

ry (Who are *we* to describe *them*?) an "Is it possible?" one (Can Ethiopian love be sung in France?), with which they are even less well prepared to deal. How you know is not a question they have been used to asking in other than practical, empiricist terms: what is the evidence? How was it collected? What does it show? How words attach to the world, texts to experience, works to lives, is not one they have been used to asking at all.

**T**hey are, at least those among them not content to rehearse habitual skills, beginning to get used to asking this question now; and some, a bit unsteadily, are even trying to answer it, if only because if they don't, others—linguists, semioticians, philosophers and worst of all literary critics—will do it for them.

There is among anthropologists a recognition, increasingly widespread, that "telling it like it is" is



*Whatever else ethnography may be, it is  
above all a rendering of the actual, 'what it is like'  
to be somewhere specific in the lifeline of the world:  
Here as Pascal famously said, rather than There.*

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in ("Don't think about ethnography, just do it") or mere flying off ("Don't do ethnography, just think about it") can be avoided, it should be possible. All that is needed is comparable art.

To say it is art—rather than some lesser achievement like expertise or some greater like enlightenment—that is most immediately involved in keeping the genre alive and active is also to say the burden of authorship cannot be evaded, however heavy it may have grown; there is no possibility of displacing it onto "method," "language" or (an especially popular maneuver at the moment) "the people themselves" redescribed (*appropriated* is probably the better term) as coauthors. If there is any way to counter the conception of ethnography as an iniquitous act or an unplayable game, it would seem to involve owning up to the fact that it is a work of the imagination. The responsibility for ethnography, or the credit, can be placed at no other door than that of the romancers who have dreamt it up.

To argue (point out, actually, for, like aerial perspective or the Pythagorean theorem, the thing once seen cannot then be unseen) that the writing of ethnography involves telling stories, making pictures, concocting symbolisms is commonly resisted, often fiercely, because of a confusion, endemic in the West since Plato at least, of the imagined with the imaginary, the fictional with the false, making things out with making them up. The strange idea that reality has an idiom in which it prefers to be described, that its very nature demands we talk about it without fuss—a spade is a spade, a rose is a rose—on pain of illusion, trumpery and self-bewitchment, leads to the stranger idea that, if literalism is lost, so is fact.

This can't be right, or else almost all ethnographies would have to be held as lacking reference to anything real. Sheer this-is-a-hawk-that-is-a-hand-

saw writing is actually very rare in anthropology beyond the level of the field report or the topical survey, and it is not upon such journeyman works that the field bases its claim to general attention, but on the glistening towers built by the likes of Lévi-Strauss, Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski and Benedict. The pretense of looking at the world directly, as though through a one-way screen, seeing others as they really are when only God is looking, is indeed quite widespread. But that is itself a rhetorical strategy, a mode of persuasion; one it may well be difficult wholly to abandon and still be believed. It is not clear just what *faction*, imaginative writing about real people in real places at real times, exactly comes to beyond a clever coinage, an alloy of *fact* and *fiction*, but anthropology is going to have to find out if it is to continue as an intellectual force in contemporary culture.

**T**here are dangers in regarding the anthropological vocation as in important respects a literary one. The enterprise may be seen as turning, like certain varieties of linguistic philosophy, on the meaning of words, its central quarrels all conceptual ones, endlessly dissected, endlessly unresolved. "What (or where) is Culture?" "Can Society be said to cause Behavior?" "Does Kinship exist?" "Do Institutions think?" It may be regarded as so much verbal seduction: rhetorical artifice designed to move intellectual goods in a competitive market. Or, perhaps most popularly, now that the world seems populated with class hypocrisy, false consciousness and secret agendas, it may be taken to be (rank) ideology in the guise of (dispassionate) science—

a mask to be struck through, an imposture to be exposed. And there is, as always when style is attended to and genre underlined, the risk of estheticism, the possibility that both ethnographers and their audience may come to believe that the value of writing about tattooing or witchcraft exhausts itself in the pleasures of the text. Anthropology as a good read.

The risks are worth running because running them leads to a thoroughgoing revision of our understanding of what it is to open (a bit) the consciousness of one group of people to (something of) the life-form of another, and in that way to (something of) their own. What it is (a task at which no one ever does more than not utterly fail) is to inscribe a present—to convey in words "what it is like" to be somewhere specific in the lifeline of the world: *Here*, as Pascal famously said, rather than *There*; *Now* rather than *Then*. Whatever else ethnography may be—Malinowskian experience-seeking, Lévi-Straussian rage for order, Benedictine cultural irony or Evans-Pritchardish cultural reassurance—it is above all a rendering of the actual, a vitality phrased.

This capacity to persuade readers (most of them academic, virtually all of them at least part-time participants in that peculiar form of existence evasively called "modern") that what they are reading is an authentic account by someone personally acquainted with how life proceeds in some place, at some time, among some group, is the basis upon which anything else ethnography seeks to do—analyze, explain, amuse, disconcert, celebrate, edify, excuse, astonish, subvert—finally rests. The textual connection of the Being Here and Being There sides of anthropology, the imaginative construction of a common ground between the Written At and the Written About (who are nowadays, as mentioned, not infrequently the same people in a different frame of mind) is the *fons et origo* of whatever power anthropology has to convince anyone of anything—not theory, not method, not even the aura of the professorial chair, consequential as these last may be.

Such a construction of a common ground, now that easy assumptions about the convergence of interests



among peoples (sexes, races, classes, cults...) of unequal power have been historically exploded and the very possibility of unconditioned description has come into question, does not look nearly so straightforward an enterprise as it did when hierarchy was in place and language weightless. The moral asymmetries across which ethnography works and the discursive complexity within which it works make any attempt to portray it as anything more than the representation of one sort of life in the categories of another impossible to defend. That may be enough. I, myself, think that it is. But it spells the end of certain pretensions.

**T**here are a number of these pretensions, but they all tend to come down in one way or another to an attempt to get round the unget-roundable fact that all ethnographical descriptions are homemade, that they are the describer's descriptions, not those of the described.

There is ethnographic ventriloquism: the claim to speak not just *about* another form of life but to speak from within it; to represent a depiction of how things look from "an Ethiopian (woman poet's) point of view" as itself an Ethiopian (woman poet's) depiction of how they look from such a view. There is text positivism: the notion that, if only Emawayish can be got to dictate or write down her poems as carefully as possible and they are translated as faithfully as possible, then the ethnographer's role dissolves into that of an honest broker passing on the substance of things with only the most trivial of transaction costs. There is dispersed authorship: the hope that ethnographic discourse can somehow be made "heteroglossial," so that Emawayish can speak within it alongside the anthropologist in some direct, equal and independent way; a There presence in a Here text. There is confessionalism: the taking of the ethnographer's experience rather than its object as the primary subject matter for analytical attention, portraying Emawayish in terms of the effect she has on those who encounter her; a There shadow of a Here reality. And there is, most popularly of all, the simple assumption that although Emawayish and

her poems are, of course, inevitably seen through an author-darkened glass, the darkening can be minimized by authorial self-inspection for "bias" or "subjectivity," and she and they can then be seen face-to-face.

All this is not to say that descriptions of how things look to one's subjects, efforts to get texts exact and translations veridical, concern with allowing to the people one writes about an imaginative existence in one's text corresponding to their actual one in their society, explicit reflection upon what fieldwork does or doesn't do to the fieldworker, and rigorous examination of one's assumptions are not supremely worth doing for anyone who aspires to tell someone leading a French sort of life what leading an Ethiopian one is like. It is to say that doing so does not relieve one of the burden of authorship; it deepens it. Getting Emawayish's views right, rendering her poems accessible, making her reality perceptible and clarifying the cultural framework within which she exists means getting them sufficiently onto the page that someone can obtain some comprehension of what they might be. This is not only a difficult business, it is one not without consequence for "native," "author" and "reader" (and, indeed, for that eternal victim of other people's activities, "innocent bystander").

**L**ike any cultural institution, anthropology—which is a rather minor one compared with law, physics, music or cost accounting—is of a place and in a time, perpetually perishing, not so certainly perpetually renewing. The energies that created it, first in the 19th century (when it tended to be a sweeping study-of-mankind sort of business), and then in the earlier part of this century (when it came to focus on particular peoples as crystal wholes, isolate and entire), were certainly connected, if rather more complexly than commonly represented, both with the imperial expansion of the West and with the rise there of a salvational belief in the powers of science. Since World War II, the dissolution of colonialism and the appearance of a more realistic view of science have rather dissipated these energies. Neither the role of intercultural middleman, shuttling back and forth between the Euro-

American centers of world power and various exotic elsewhere so as to mediate between the prejudices of the one and the parochialisms of the other, nor that of transcultural theoretician, bringing odd beliefs and unusual social structures under general laws, is anywhere nearly so available to anthropologists as they once were. And thus the question arises: what is available? What is the next necessary thing?

There is, of course, no single answer to this question, nor can answers be given before the fact, before anthropological authors actually author them. Prescriptive criticism—this is what you must do, that is what you must not—is as absurd in anthropology as it is in any other intellectual enterprise not dogmatically based. Like poems and hypotheses, ethnographies can be judged only after someone has brought them into being. But, for all that, it seems likely that whatever use ethnographic texts will have in the future, if in fact they actually have any, it will involve enabling conversation across societal lines—of ethnicity, religion, class, gender, language, race—that have grown progressively more nuanced, more immediate and more irregular. The next necessary thing (so at least it seems to me) is neither the construction of a universal Esperanto-like culture, the culture of airports and motor hotels, nor the invention of some vast technology of human management. It is to enlarge the possibility of intelligible discourse between people quite different from one another in interest, outlook, wealth and power, and yet contained in a world where, tumbled as they are into endless connection, it is increasingly difficult to get out of each other's way. ♦



While New York's grand Metropolitan Museum of Art once had a reputation for indifference toward contemporary art, now it is one of the busiest collectors of

this work. On these pages are a selection of paintings representing the Met's new interest in a number of today's young artists whose works appeared in the museum's recent exhibition "The 1980s: A New Generation."

This exhibition, as William S. Lieberman, the chairman of the Met's department of 20th-century art, points out, is an "informal introduction" to recent acquisitions of works by painters and sculptors born after 1945; it is not intended as a national survey. What it does is to show significant works by a cross-section of young and promising artists, many of whom were trained elsewhere and migrated to New York to launch their career. David Bates, whose quasi-primitive painting "The Conservatory" is shown at right, is from Dallas. He had his first one-man show when he was 24 and moved to New York the next year.

The works selected, says Lieberman, mirror the "diversity of artistic styles that characterize the decade—from expressionistically vigorous to lyrical. The selection also indicates certain recurring themes: abstraction,

# ARTISTS — OF THE — EIGHTIES

realistic figuration, landscape and narrative." Others communicate "private messages that draw on the personal and psychological experiences of the indi-

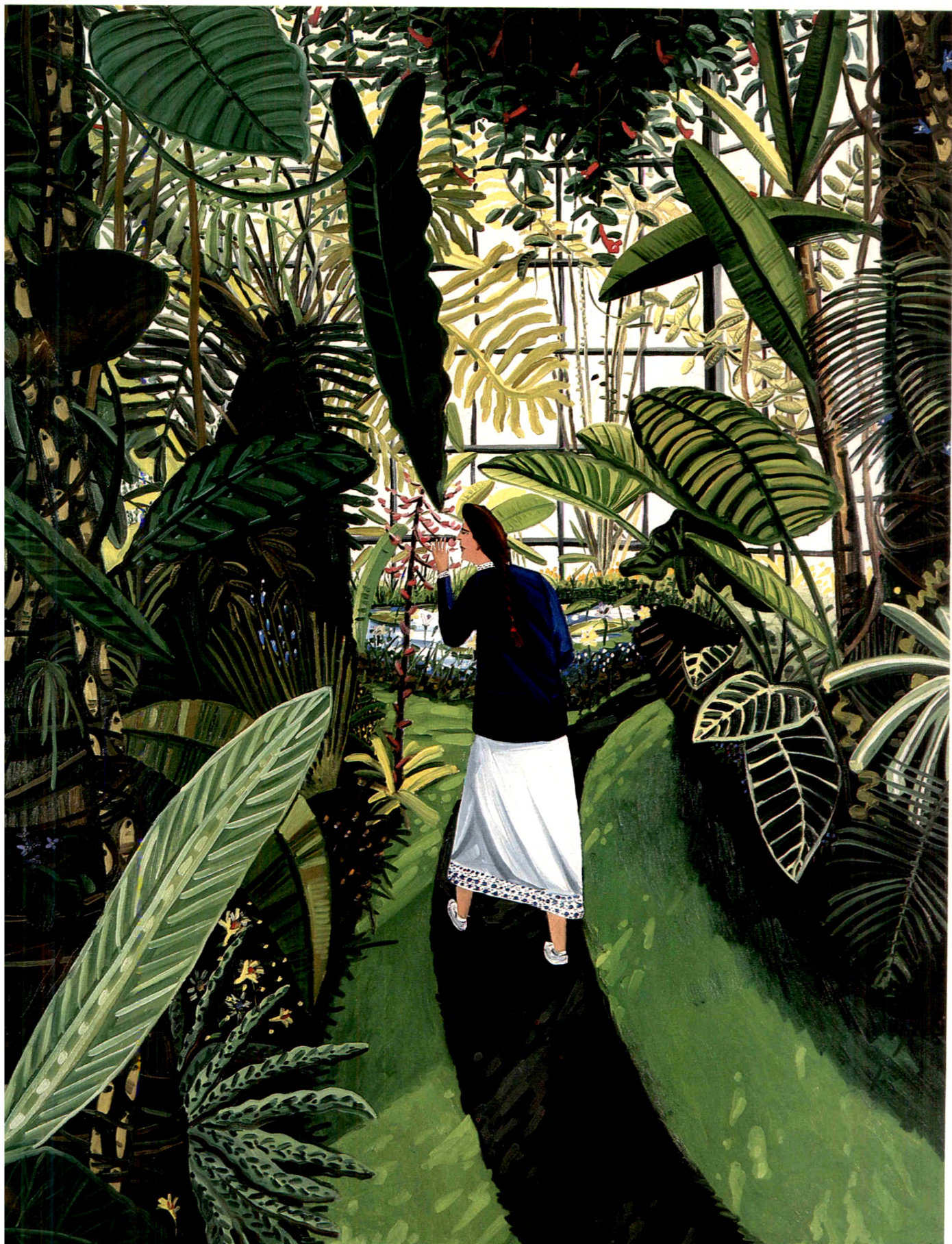
vidual artists." David Reed, for example, sees painting as "a kind of nonverbal thinking that gives a structure to our emotional lives." The highly finished surfaces of his paintings (see pages 68-69) suggest both modern photography and a baroque interplay of light and dark reminiscent of Caravaggio.

The show at the Met is one of the first in the museum's new Lila Acheson Wallace Wing, an addition that includes 22 galleries built expressly to house modern art—part of an expansion program that has doubled the museum's size since 1970. This commitment to current artists marks a transformation for a museum whose trustees were once notorious for their aversion to all but the most established forms of art, and it is part of a trend toward taking risks on new artists among U.S. museums in general. A museum without a collection of today's promising young artists is, in the words of Henry Geldzahler, a former curator of contemporary art at the Met, "an encyclopedia without a last volume."

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David Bates "The Conservatory," 1985  
Oil on canvas, 244 x 198 cm  
Courtesy of Charles Cowles Gallery, Inc., New York









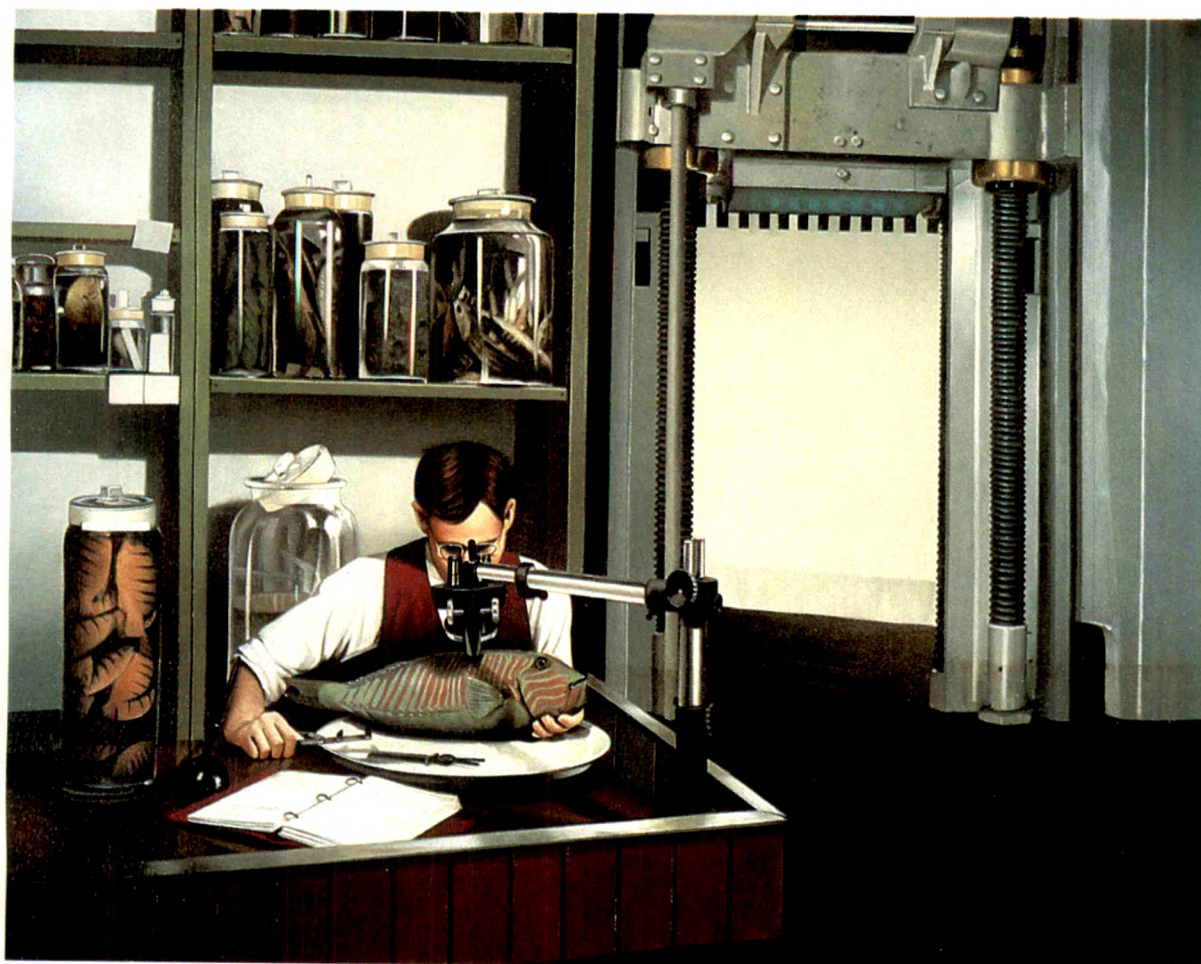
John Alexander "Red Goat," 1983  
Oil on canvas, 188 x 213 cm  
Courtesy of the Metropolitan  
Museum of Art



John Beerman "In the Heart of the Seer," 1986  
Oil on masonite and wood, 38 x 76 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

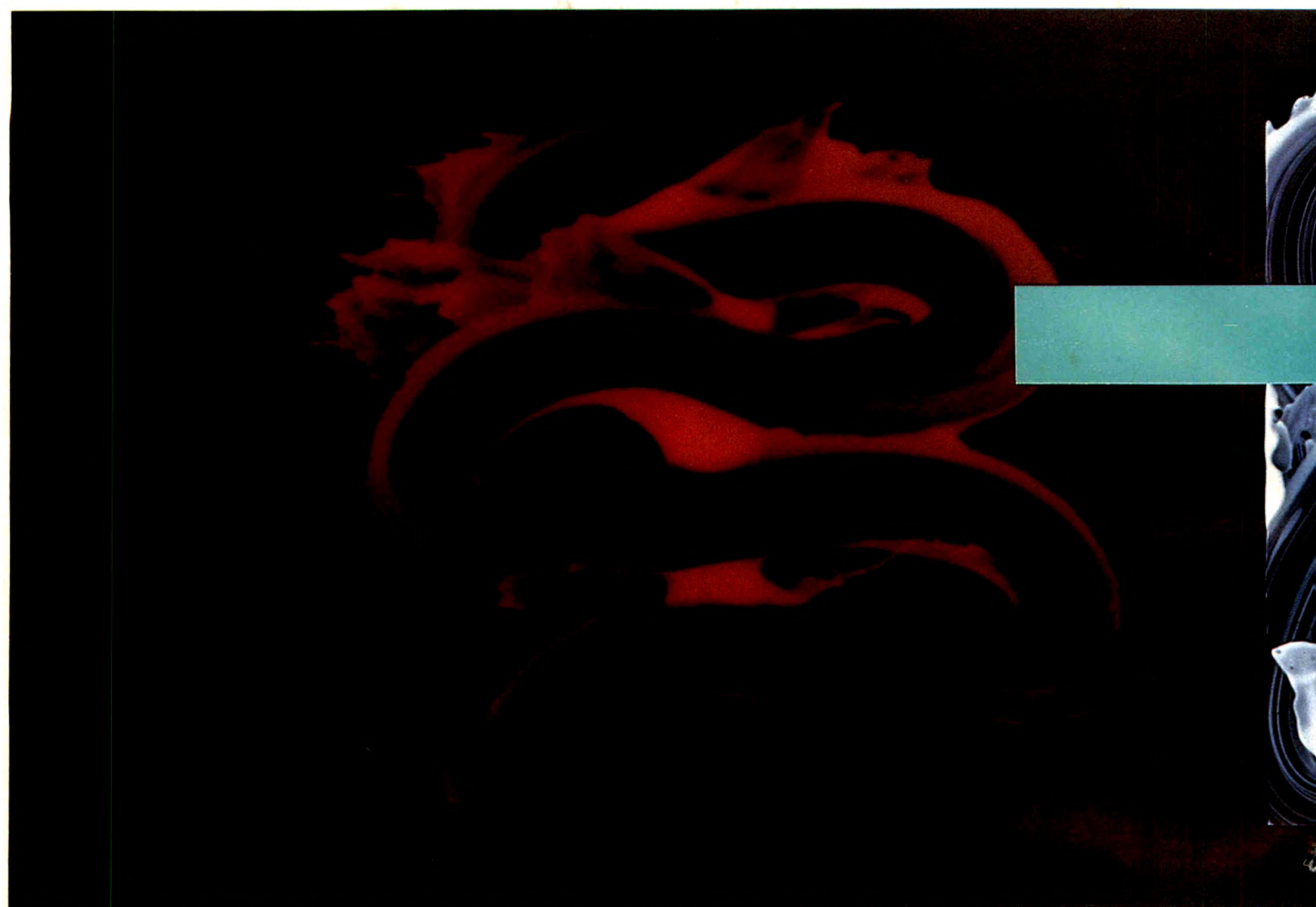


Randy Dudley "Verifying Dissonant Statistics," 1981  
Oil on canvas, 55 x 70 cm  
Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art



Gregory Amenoff "Hinterland," 1982  
Oil on canvas, 224 x 254 cm  
Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art



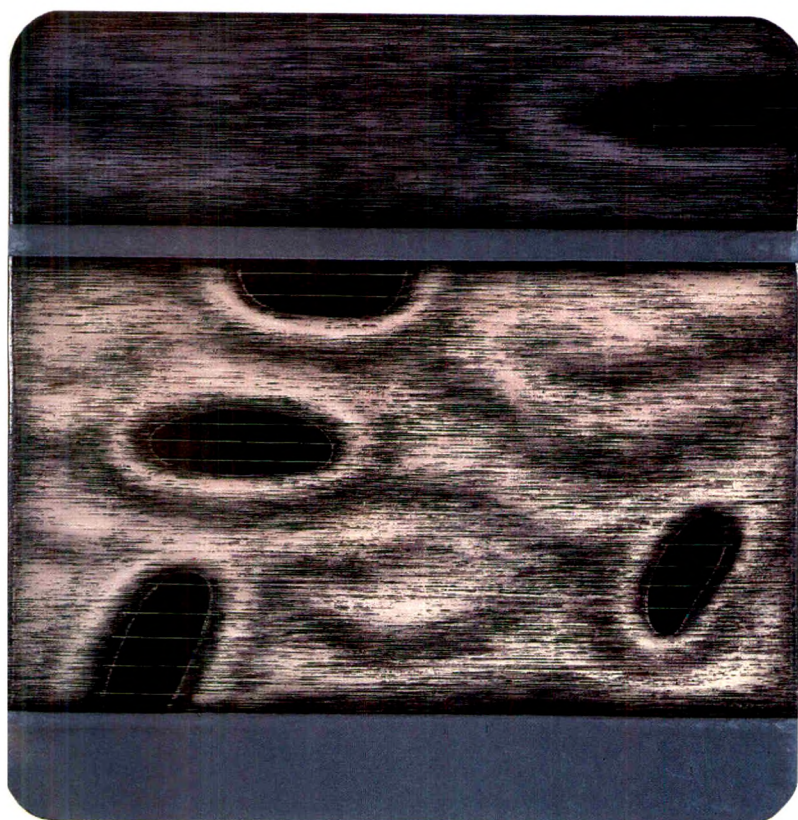
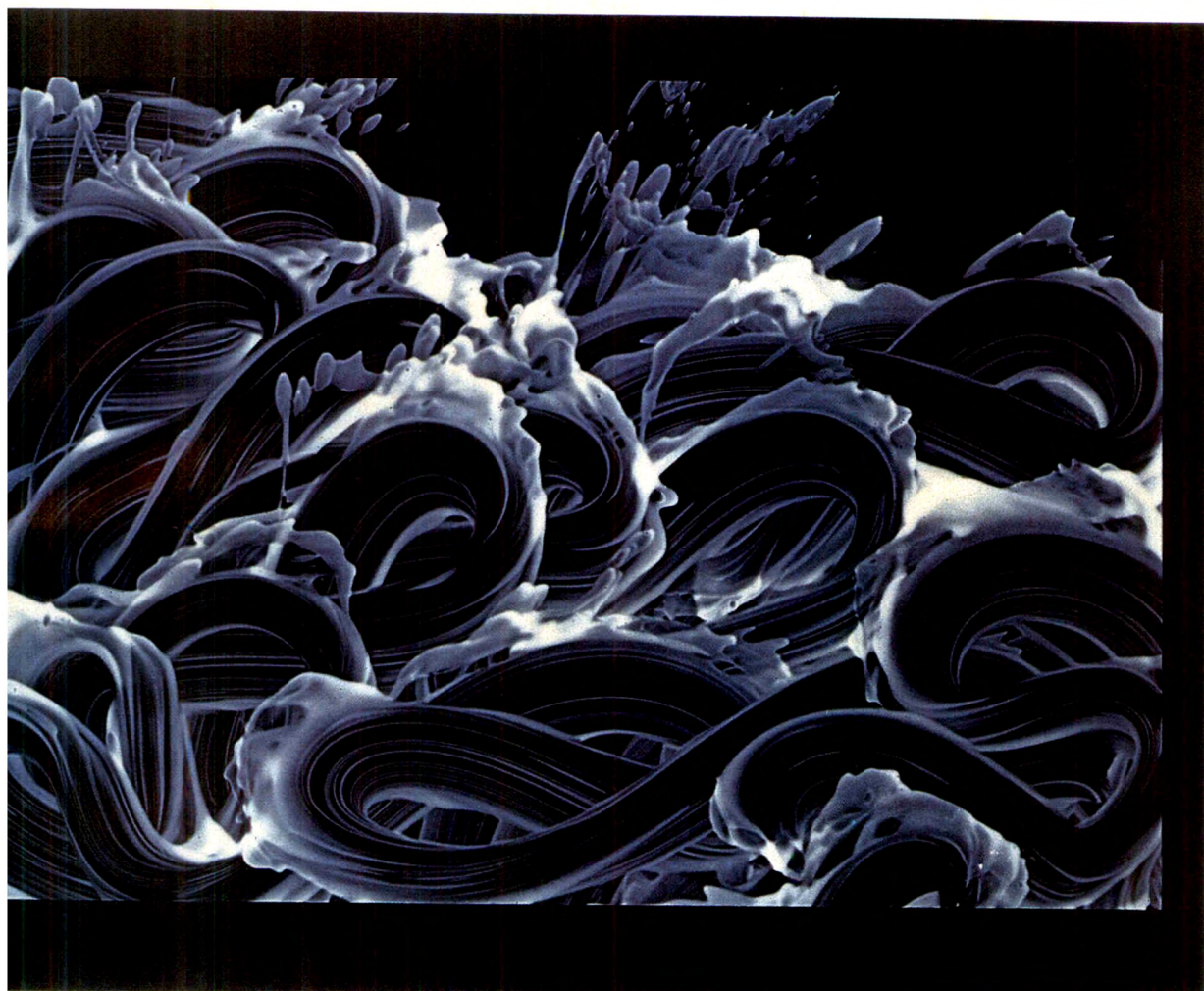


David Reed "Number 232," 1986  
Oil and alkyd on canvas, 91 x 274 cm  
Courtesy of Max Protetch Gallery, New York



Mark Kostabi "Requiem," 1987  
Oil and enamel on canvas, 213 x 183 cm  
Courtesy of the artist





Tishan Hsu "Transplant," 1987  
Alkyd, acrylic and carved wood, 152 x 152 x 8 cm  
Courtesy of Pat Hearn Gallery, New York



Ron Janowich "Johanna," 1985  
Oil on canvas, 259 x 152 cm  
Courtesy of the Metropolitan  
Museum of Art





John McNamara "The Nature of Inquisitive Persistence," 1984-85  
Oil on canvas, 283 x 262 cm  
Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art





# REVIEWS

## ECONOMICS

### Population and Resources

PASSAGE TO A HUMAN WORLD: THE DYNAMICS OF CREATING GLOBAL WEALTH. By Max Singer. Transaction Books. 390 pp.

Reviewed by Nicholas N. Eberstadt

If the quest for material progress has come increasingly to direct our everyday activity, it does not seem to have bestowed upon us any corresponding insight into the nature of the world we are so busily creating. This imbalance between human capability and human understanding is most apparent in the efforts of well-informed people to describe what the future is likely to resemble.

In the 1960s, for example, a best-selling book by a distinguished biologist announced that "in the 1970s...nothing can prevent a substantial increase in the world death rate." Yet in actuality the world was then, and continues now to be, in the midst of a health revolution—one that has steadily propelled global life expectancy to new highs, and has correspondingly depressed

global death rates to record lows.

Subsequent studies, including the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* and the Carter Administration's *Global 2000 Report to the President*, deployed mathematical equations and computer simulations to make the case that the world of the future would be characterized by growing population pressure, resource scarcity and environmental stress. Definitive though these computer-generated conclusions may have seemed at first glance, they were (as was gradually appreciated) simply elaborate reiterations of assumptions originally programmed into their respective models.

Not, however, that this creed of pessimism about the economic future has gone unchallenged. In recent years, a small but increasingly influential group of authors has argued that the progress experienced over the past century or two may reasonably be expected to continue during coming decades and centuries. Prominent names in this circle include Julian Simon, the economist whose critiques appear to have been instrumental in prompting the U.S. National Academy of Sciences to revise and moderate its earlier pronouncements on the consequences of rapid population growth, and the late Herman Kahn, the prolific "futurologist" whose final years were largely devoted to fleshing out his "guardedly optimistic" vision of life in the 21st and 22nd centuries.

A new addition to this literature has now been offered by Max Sing-

er, cofounder with Kahn of the Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank, and later its president. *Passage to a Human World: The Dynamics of Creating Global Wealth* is a thoughtful discussion of the trend toward worldwide affluence and of the trouble educated Americans have in recognizing it.

Singer proposes that the world population two centuries hence might be 10,000 million, or even more. Such figures are similar to those in many of the more recent treatises expounding on the dangers of uncontrolled population growth—higher, actually, than in some. Singer's vision, however, is anything but apocalyptic. The world he sees is richer than the one we now inhabit: indeed, per-capita income is about 10 times its current level, and average income for the world as a whole is almost twice as high as in the United States today. Health conditions are so favorable that life expectancy typically approaches the biological maximum encoded in one's genes. Families enjoy more spacious and comfortable accommodations, and have greater access to parks and the recreational out-of-doors. And while consumption has enormously increased, thanks to a level of global economic activity over 20 times greater than our own, shortages of raw materials do not plague this world and pollution by most relevant measures has substantially diminished.

While the picture of the future that Singer sketches will be sure to surprise, and even startle, some readers, Singer's own line of reasoning is hardly radical. *Passage to a Hu-*

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man World contemplates the future cautiously. Singer does not invoke as yet undreamed of scientific breakthroughs or require specific leaps of technological faith.

The essence of Singer's argument concerns the human mastery of nature. As he explains it, the process is well under way already. "We live today," he writes, "just about at the middle of a period of only a few hundred years, during which mankind is changing the world as it has never been changed before into the way that it will probably be from now on." Whereas "formerly nature dominated man (but not completely), after we finish our brief current passage man will dominate nature (but not completely)."

Singer notes especially the increased importance of education, specialized skills and newly created technologies in the processes of production over the past century or so. The rise of the human factor within economic activity, he repeat-

edly emphasizes, is a trend fraught with significance, and some of its most important implications bear on the availability and use of natural resources. In brief, human ideas, in the form of technology, routinely bring economic value to matter previously considered worthless (bauxite, petroleum, uranium, sand). By Singer's estimate, world population is five times higher today than it was 200 years ago, but average per-capita income has risen by a factor of 10. Thus, "the world is now wealthy enough to make possible 50 times as much consumption each year as there was two centuries ago. Since physical resources are the same...it must be intangibles that enable us to produce so much more."

The "passage to a human world," therefore, is a journey in which resources are, in a meaningful sense, *created*. While the stock of specific commodities (e.g., oil) may be diminished through human use, the routinization of research, innovation and substitution indicates to Singer that "resources" will, practically speaking, generally and typically be less scarce—and less expensive—in the future. Thanks to man's ingenuity, he writes, "the finiteness of the Earth does not doom man to scarcity of essential raw materials or to a polluted environment."

If Singer sets himself against the pessimists, however, he himself is no starry-eyed believer in science and the benevolence of human nature. Far from it. "People should not kid themselves," he warns, "that because a change is necessary it is good for everyone and harms no innocent victims." For, he continues, "even if there were no malice or greed, immense amounts of suffering and sacrifice would be required to achieve economic growth." And Singer is extremely careful in judging the "human world" he envisions. "This book," he states, "makes no claim that the future will be better than the past. We humans have amply demonstrated our power to do evil and create unhappiness....In a human world the main dangers, also, are human creations." In Singer's view, mankind will retain its capacity to choose between good

and evil—and to make mistakes.

Simple though this concession may seem, it serves to confute all mechanistic thinking about "the long run," whether of the optimistic or pessimistic variety. Rather, Singer's aim in *Passage to a Human World* is to restore to populations of the future that preeminently human dimension of moral choice which so many of today's futuristic projections have stripped from them. It is an aim which this interesting, even exciting, book consistently realizes. ♦

## SOCIETY

### What People Really Do and Say

MIDDLE AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM: THE FUTURE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY. By Herbert J. Gans. *The Free Press*. 208 pp.

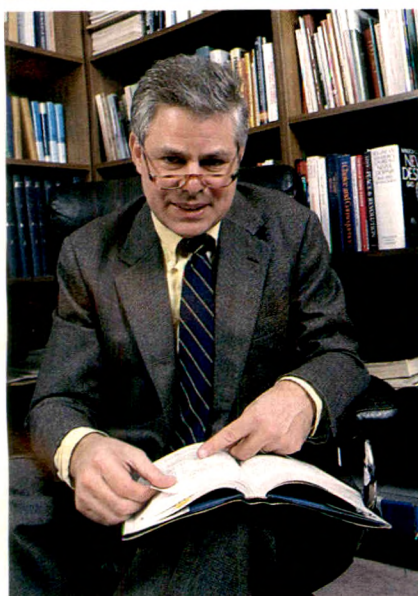
Reviewed by Michael Schudson

There is nothing exotic or recondite about the work of sociologist Herbert Gans. *The Urban Villagers* (1962), a study of an Italian-American community in Boston, *The Levittowners* (1967), an examination of a middle-American suburb, and *Deciding What's News* (1979), a study of how reporters and editors make their decisions about the news, all demonstrate his adherence to a refreshingly simple concept of sociology. "The essence of sociology," he wrote in *The Levittowners*, "is that it observes what people really do and say."

Gans's new book is in some respects an odd departure. Here is an exemplary fieldworker writing

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Global prognosticator Max Singer.

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from his study. Here is a teacher who insists that good social research requires a subtle and intimate knowledge of the people one writes about, relying for data on public-opinion polls. Here is a social democrat who argues that since we cannot expect any notable growth in political participation in this country we should make society more democratic without making it more participatory. Here is a staunch liberal asking that we learn to base social criticism on a more pragmatic and plain-spoken recognition of the limits and possibilities of American culture.

*Middle American Individualism* describes attitudes and values widely shared by "middle Americans." These are the majority of Americans who, in terms of class, sit between the poor and the upper middle class. They are, generally speaking, secondary-school graduates but not necessarily college graduates, with family incomes between \$15,000 and \$45,000 a year, working in a wide array of blue-collar and white-collar, industrial, bureaucratic and clerical positions. This broad swatch of the American population is deeply concerned about economic security. Distrustful of large institutions and oriented primarily to family and to a micro-social world of informal groups, they seek control over their lives.

This means that home ownership is for them a very high value. Nearly 30 years ago in Levittown, Gans found that people moved to the suburbs to be able to buy their own, free-standing home, seeking in it the privacy, freedom of action and self-expression they believed a house provides. Today Gans finds people's values are essentially no different. Their virtues are family-, security- and control-oriented, not venturesome. Their world has been characterized, since World War II, by a loosening of ties to traditional religious, political, community and nuclear-family structures as well as by their increasing affluence.

The most prominent feature of middle-Americans' political activity is what Gans calls "organizational avoidance." Unlike the upper middle class, they participate very little in formal voluntary organizations. They distrust both big business and big government.

Gans finds the private orientation of middle Americans so strong, and so eminently reasonable, that he is more apt to wonder why people participate in politics at all rather than why they do not. He sees many middle Americans involved in politics by reading the news and through voting, despite gradually declining participation at the polls. Nevertheless, he sees no reason to imagine any growth in political participation.

Gans proposes two substitutes for participation: greater responsiveness of and greater representation in governmental institutions. The most novel of his suggestions is a proposal for a "Public Polling Service," which could conduct more polls with different sorts of questions from those we have today. He rightly observes that present polling organizations are "sufficiently close to the political and economic establishments that they ask questions mainly about current issues of concern to them." We know much more from polls about how people respond to a presidential candidate's agenda than we do about what people believe should be on that agenda.

Gans's main concern is to build up the "sustenance policies" of government so that middle Americans and others can trust the government for economic security when all else fails. This means more adequate unemployment insurance, better government regulation of job quality and work safety, the provision of or regulation of housing, education and health services, and the provision of jobs when the private sector falters. The centerpiece of liberal democracy, for Gans, is economic security, and the surest al-

liance between middle Americans and upper-middle-class liberals must be based on support for government sustenance of economic security.

This is, in a nutshell, what the book says. It is equally important to note, however, who the book is saying this to. *Middle American Individualism* is aimed at an audience that will not be embarrassed to confess allegiance to liberal democracy. Gans's pragmatism is in the tradition of the American philosopher John Dewey, a practical search to realize deeply held liberal values. His book is addressed to liberal and moderate Democrats and liberal Republicans, anyone willing to defend the basic philosophy of a modern welfare state. It is also addressed to social democrats, socialists and a variety of liberal social critics who, in Gans's view, have become ensnared in fantasies about the future of American society. He numbers in this group Richard Sennett and Christopher Lasch, who attack the materialism, hedonism and selfishness they associate with middle-class American individualism. Gans challenges the evidence: is there more selfishness or narcissism or materialism now than in the past? He doubts it. He thinks critics of the "hedonism" of middle Americans typically confuse the moral judgment that people place too much value on private goods with an esthetic judgment that they value the wrong goods. "Sermons against selfishness and attacks on self-development, or merely on the desire for more comfort," he writes, "are not likely to be effective." This is vintage Gans. As he wrote in *The Levittowners*, "Sociology is a democratic method of inquiry; it assumes that people have some right to be what they are."

A more formidable critic, and one to whom Gans obviously gives considerable respect and at least some ground, is Robert Bellah—and his coauthors of *Habits of the Heart* (reviewed in *Review* 1/87). Gans grants Bellah's observation that Americans are nostalgic for the "small town" and the harmonious community. But Gans doubts that people really mean their communitarian



longings—they may wish for a harmonious community, but it is a fantasy in which today's cultural and social differences and divergences of interest do not exist.

Even without doing his own fieldwork this time around, Gans seems to be very close to what people really do and say. Can sociology aspire to more than observing what people really do and say? I think so. Sociology puts those observations in perspective and suggests causes, contexts and alternatives. People indeed have some right to be what they are; that should not keep others from saying, respectfully, that they might be other or even better. Gans does not take as given the existing distribution of power and wealth in society, but he does urge reformers to accept as unyielding the aspirations, values and dreams that this distribution of power and wealth have helped give rise to. He simply does not see these middle-American individualist aspirations as very objectionable.

Gans came to the United States from Germany as a boy and grew up without affluence or the expectation of it. He is profoundly unnostalgic in ways that are almost heresy on the Left (for instance, "more people are doing work in which they have pride of craft today than ever before"). He recognizes not only how good political participation can be but, even more, how hard it is, observing that an extremely high level of energy is "a too rarely recognized prerequisite for political activism."

His style mirrors his ideas—neither stirring nor picturesque, he writes plainly of what he sees and what he hopes for. His commitment is to the principles of social welfare and a humane and egalitarian social order, all without frills. It is as sturdy and steady a commitment as any that exists in contemporary American social thought. ♦

## SPORT

### National Pastimes

A WHOLE NEW BALL GAME: AN INTERPRETATION OF AMERICAN SPORTS. By Allen Guttman. *The University of North Carolina Press*. 233 pp.

Reviewed by Erich Segal

Let us begin with the Frisbee. This harmless object was invented in 1948 and provided a source of innocent pleasure to players young and old. Who would have imagined by 1974 there would be an official World Frisbee Championship? Allen Guttman would have. He is one of a handful of American scholars to receive the ultimate accolade: to be cited as an authority by the Germans who dominate sports scholarship.

His most important book, *From*

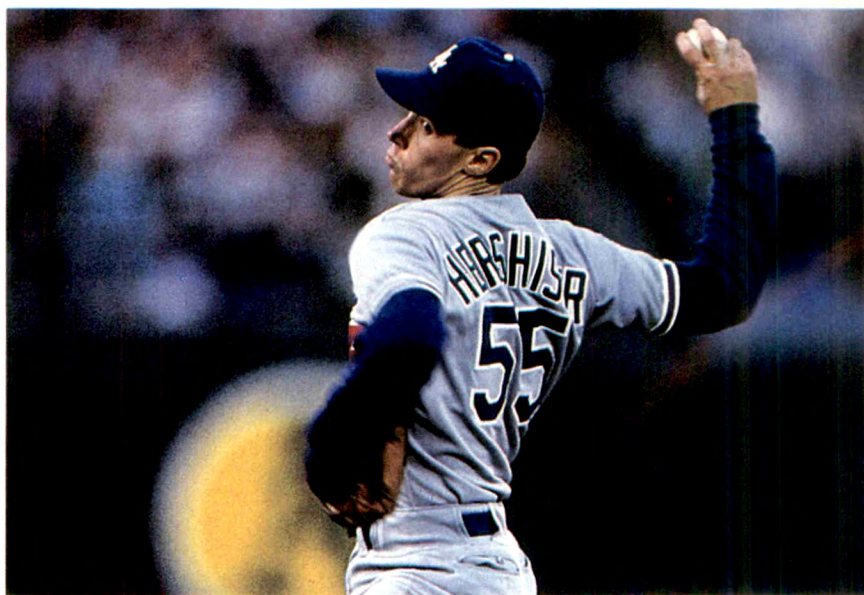
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*Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*, used Max Weber's terminology to demonstrate that modern sport was a child of the Industrial Revolution. Unlike the analogous activities of prior ages—all of them traceable in one way or another to religious rites—the new secularized sport was distinguished by such characteristics as equality (for example, playing by a universally accepted rule book), rationalization (in Weber's terminology, *Zwecklichkeit*, a logical relationship between means and ends), bureaucratic organization and quantification.

But the most significant innovation was the quest for records, a notion completely alien to the ancient Greek mentality. As Guttman puts it: "Once the gods have vanished from Mount Olympus or from Dante's Paradise, we can no longer run to appease them or to save our souls, but we can set a new record. It is a uniquely modern form of immortality."

Guttman, a professor of English and American studies at Amherst College in Massachusetts, is also a keen ethnologist following in the footsteps of such disparate worthies as Herodotus, the Canadian media analyst Marshall McLuhan and the



Star baseball pitcher Orel Hershiser.

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French anthropologist Roger Caillois, all of whom shared the belief that sports reflect the character of a given society.

A *Whole New Ball Game* is Guttman's attempt to put his theories to the test by focusing on the games America plays. Some of his arguments may seem familiar, but he presents them so neatly and concisely that there is no sense of going over old ground. He believes that "the agonistic interaction of a contest seems to mobilize Americans' energies beyond what is possible in noncompetitive situations."

Guttman begins his study with pre-Columbian cultures because the Native Americans offer a prime example of premodern (that is, religiously linked) activities—sometimes bloody, often anarchic (there were no rule books), almost always a form of religious fertility rite. The predominant figure at these events was the high priest, whose role in the modern era has been reduced to that of a bit player exhorting the team at halftime to go out and fight even more fiercely for God, country and—especially—college.

The author's perceptive reading of Puritan literature reveals that New England was not entirely peopled by joyless citizens like the clergyman Cotton Mather. In fact, the great number of diatribes and severe punishments (17th-century Vermonters risked the cat-o'-nine-tails whipping if they so much as ran, rode or jumped on a Sunday) only proves that these "sins" were popular, not to say pandemic.

Guttman's description of the sportsmen of the southern states bears out the sociological truth that they were emulators of the Cavaliers. They rode, they hunted, they even held one or two medieval tournaments.

As Guttman demonstrates, the real birthplace of modern American sport was New York, where in 1846 one Alexander Cartwright codified the essential rules of a game called "Base Ball." Though in reality little more than a variation of the British children's game of rounders, baseball was quickly adopted as America's national pastime. And almost immediately

proved a muse that brought out the lyricism in innumerable writers. To Mark Twain, baseball was "the very symbol, the outward and visible expression of the drive and push and rush and struggle of the raging, tearing, booming 19th century."

Countless social scientists have studied the Americanness of baseball, with its ever-widening foul lines stretching out toward the horizon, the sport that Guttman calls an intellectual meta-game. Some scholars credit the national pastime with having woven the various threads of immigrant cultures into a single cloth of Stars and Stripes.

Guttman posits basketball as the "prototypical modern sport." For this game was truly invented in America at a specific time (1891), at a specific place (Springfield, Massachusetts), by a specific person (James Naismith), who himself declared that this new sport was "a synthetic product of the office." Here, indeed, was a game that had rules (it was "rationalized," in Guttman's terminology) before the first ball was tossed. Secular in theory, it was nonetheless seen as an excellent means of promoting what the British preacher Charles Kingsley called "muscular Christianity." And missionaries to the Far East spread basketball as well as the Gospel. In this sense much of modern sport has retained a scintilla of religion.

In the second half of the book, Guttman turns social critic, discussing the darker sides of American sport—for example, the overemphasis, both parental and institutional, on *winning* at all costs (even at the risk of bodily harm), be it in professional football's Super Bowl or in the pee-wee leagues. He is especially acerbic when dealing with the corruption of intercollegiate athletics and the exploitation of black athletes. This, of course, is ground that has been covered before, but it somehow seems more shocking when presented by an academic who cites all the supporting literature for his grim statistics.

Yet even in the author's discussion of such well-explored topics as the inequities in women's sports, most readers will learn something new. Who would not be astounded at a judge's verdict that a schoolgirl could not run with the boys' cross-country team because we have not "become so decadent," and the boys would lose "the glory of achievement"? These sentiments could have come from a sermon of a Puritan preacher. But they were spoken little more than 15 years ago by Judge John Clark Fitzgerald of New Haven Superior Court in Connecticut.

There are more surprises in Guttman's book. How many people are aware that, strictly speaking, Jackie Robinson was *not* the first black in major-league baseball? (It was Moses Fleetwood Walker, who was playing for Toledo when it joined the American Association in 1884.)

But not all of Guttman's swings are home runs. He has his share of strikeouts. Some of his predictions for the future of American sport are quixotic—like his belief that "the only rational solution to the radical inequality that mars contemporary basketball is the institution of height divisions." Does not the very fact that there are so many giants make a phenomenon like Spud Webb, the diminutive dynamo of the Atlanta Hawks professional basketball team, seem all the more heroic? Besides, in the ancient Olympics there were no size categories, even in boxing, where bigger did not always turn out to be better.

Guttman is at his best when he writes as a literature professor. For it might be argued that the mirror of American society is not sport itself, but the way our most creative writers have dealt with it. What could be more emblematic of the shattered American dream than the hero of Irwin Shaw's brilliant short story "The Eighty-Yard Run" sitting on the "frail green grass of the practice field," in the shadow of the stadium where his star once burned so brightly? For it seems that in American literature the athletic hero finishes his journey, as so often in F. Scott Fitzgerald, on "this side of paradise." ♦



## PSYCHOLOGY

### Prophet of the Higher Self

THE RIGHT TO BE HUMAN: A BIOGRAPHY OF ABRAHAM MASLOW. By Edward Hoffman. Jeremy P. Tarcher Inc. 416 pp.

Reviewed by James S. Gordon

*Self-actualization, humanistic psychology, peak experience.* Sympathetic readers associate these terms with the aspirations of the human-potential movement. Critics see them as hallmarks of the self-absorption of the "me generation" of the 1970s. But, inevitably, these phrases evoke the name of Abraham Maslow, the research psychologist and Brandeis University professor who coined them.

Maslow died in 1970 at age 62, but his influence grows with each year. Humanistic psychology and an ever-proliferating variety of popular therapies and self-help groups increasingly have been adopting his ideas: his denunciation of the pathological focus of most of conventional psychiatry and psychology, his conviction that each of us has a "real self" that is good or neutral and can be realized, and his belief that such self-realization includes and is in part based on transcendent experience.

Popular self-help programs such as "Lifespring" and "est," the latest diet and exercise book, and many of the most recent applications of ancient meditative techniques are all informed and buoyed by Maslow's hopeful revisionist psychology.

In *The Right To Be Human*, Edward Hoffman, a psychologist who has previously coauthored a biography of the unorthodox Viennese psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich and written about Jewish mysticism and

psychology, traces the growth of Maslow's mind and the formation of his most distinctive and influential theories. He shows us Maslow in 1928, an undergraduate at New York's City College, excitedly reading the behaviorist psychology of John B. Watson, discovering in his upbeat essays both a "science of psychology" and the possibility of changing even the most vexing of human behaviors.

We see him as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin studying dominance behavior among monkeys under the tutelage of Harry Harlow, who performed the famous experiments on the effects of maternal deprivation on primates. Then we are back in New York with Maslow as he works, first under Edward Thorndike, the pioneer of psychological testing at Columbia University, and then with the great European behavioral scientists who came as refugees to the New School for Social Research in the 1930s: the physicians Alfred Adler, Karen Horney and Kurt Goldstein; the gestalt psychologist



Psychologist Abraham Maslow.

Sam Burlockoff

Max Wertheimer; and the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm.

Though he was at this time a professor of psychology at Brooklyn College, Maslow still exhibits the openness, eagerness and arrogance of the very bright and bookish student. Reading Hoffman's account, we can picture Maslow, tall and slightly stooped, waiting at a few paces' distance for one of his mentors—Wertheimer or Adler or the Columbia anthropologist Ruth Benedict—to answer the fast question so that he can have extra time, the last words on the walk home or over the cup of coffee in the cafeteria. And reading Hoffman's account, we discover the building blocks from which Maslow developed those concepts for which we remember him.

Behaviorism confirmed Maslow's distinctly American can-do sense of optimism. His work on dominance in monkeys helped him to understand that the hierarchy of social relations had its analogue in a hierarchy of needs and satisfactions. Wertheimer first suggested to Maslow that this hierarchy of human impulses and behaviors might extend from survival needs and sexual satisfaction to feelings of kindness and altruism. And Goldstein, the great neurologist who coined the phrase *self-actualization*, provided both the clinical evidence and the theoretical suggestion that each organism, including, of course, each human, had within it a kind of internal need to use all of its potential.

By the 1940s, Maslow began to articulate his distinctive humanistic perspective, to lay the groundwork for a "Third Force" in psychology, one more optimistic than the First Force of psychoanalysis and deeper and richer than the Second Force of behaviorism. In a series of books, papers and lectures he outlined a new theory of motivation and personality, a "psychology of being" he would call it. Human beings were, as other psychologies maintained, motivated by instinctual needs—for food, warmth, sexual release, etc. But once these lower needs were fulfilled, they no longer held sway; then other, "higher" needs—for affiliation, love, creativity, altruism—

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could emerge. Human beings should not take their measure from pathological specimens or the "average man" but from those of their fellows who are most highly developed—the "saints and sages."

Our guide and model, Maslow declared, "[is] the fully growing, self-fulfilling human being." Each person had within himself a potential, similar to that of the saints and sages, waiting to unfold. When, in the 1960s, the quest for their own greater potential became a motivating force for large numbers of seekers and activists, Maslow found a mass audience. His 1962 text, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, sold 200,000 copies before a trade edition was released in 1968.

Toward the end of his life, Maslow's concerns broadened still further. He became particularly interested in the power of peak experiences—"a single glimpse of heaven"—to transform individuals, and in the possibility of creating utopian communities of self-actualized people who had had such experiences. He saw the need now for a "Fourth Force" in psychology, one which emphasized transcendent experience, and he coined the term *transpersonal psychology* to describe it. Meanwhile, his conviction that individual self-actualization and corporate success were interrelated had made him a guide to progressive businessmen as well as individual seekers.

Hoffman tells the story of Maslow's intellectual development and of his widening sphere of influence well, and in the process, he provides a nice portrait of many of the significant figures in 20th-century American psychology. He is far less skillful in making Maslow the man come alive. We do have a sense of the eager, overachieving and sometimes arrogant boy who remained alive inside the man—boasting of his IQ to his Brandeis colleague Max Lerner, puzzled that some of his mentors became impatient with him—but there is little about Maslow's relationships with his wife and children and little depth to the accounts of his relationships with contemporaries and colleagues. It's not clear if

Hoffman, who clearly idealizes Maslow, doesn't want to tarnish his image or whether he was consciously—and unfortunately—limiting himself to intellectual biography.

But even with this shortcoming, *The Right To Be Human* is a fascinating and useful study of the thoughts of a man whose hopeful, expansive vision of what it means to be human has much to offer us. ♦

## MANAGEMENT

### Evaluating Public Policy

SOCIAL SCIENCE IN GOVERNMENT: USES AND MISUSES. By Richard Nathan. *Basic Books*. 204 pp.

Reviewed by James Q. Wilson

Among the few things on which conservatives and Marxists agree is that intellectuals play the wrong role in public affairs. Whenever the federal government grows rapidly, conservative critics complain that intellectuals are gaining too much power.

Franklin Roosevelt's "brain trust," John F. Kennedy's "best and the brightest," Lyndon Johnson's proliferation of task forces run by professors—all these are regarded as evidence that impractical, ideology-driven social engineers have the ear of gullible politicians. To Marxists, these same facts are evidence that the professoriate has sold out to the power brokers, trading their integrity for the appearance of wisdom and influence and the reality of money and notoriety.

In fact, the actual role of intellectuals, and especially of social scientists, in governmental affairs is exaggerated. Most of the major initiatives of Roosevelt's New Deal,

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Kennedy's New Frontier and Johnson's Great Society were conceived and designed by bureaucrats, politicians, interest groups, congressional staffers and Wall Street lawyers. Though ex-professors were often in evidence, they were rarely in power.

There never was much reason to suppose that social scientists would be good at designing policies. But there is every reason to think they would be good at testing the policy prescriptions of others. They have two clear advantages over bureaucrats in this regard: their careers do not suffer if a policy is found to have failed; and they know how to design experiments, conduct surveys and analyze data. Yet for the half-century or more since the federal government became an active, omnipresent force in American life, there have only been a handful of instances in which an important policy initiative has been tested in any rigorous way.

Richard Nathan, a professor of political science at Princeton University, has had a long and close association with some of the few, significant efforts to use social science to find out what works. In *Social Science in Government: Uses and Misuses*, he summarizes in plain English what he has learned about how to evaluate public policy. It is an important book for a political system that may have wearied of adopting programs simply because they make us feel good or serve ideological ends.

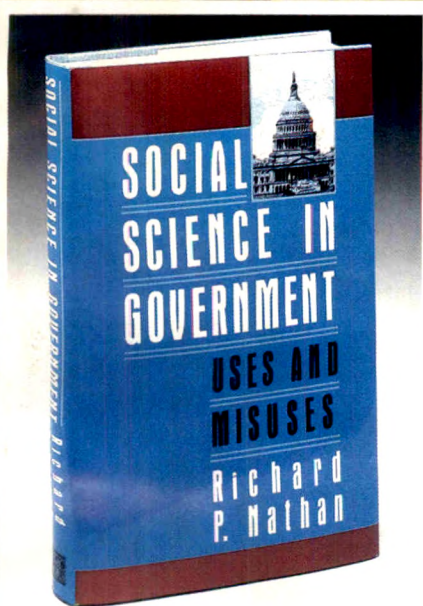
After a brief outline of the rise and fall of other kinds of social-science interventions Nathan describes the conditions that should be met for an evaluation to be meaningful:

- The evaluation must be carried out by people other than the program managers. Program managers will almost always find reasons to think their programs have been successful.
- The effects of the new program



can be assessed only by comparing people receiving the treatment to a control group—i.e., people not receiving it. Just making a before-and-after comparison describing what happened to the treatment group is not enough—these people may have changed for reasons having nothing to do with the program.

- When putting people in treatment and control groups, random assignment is far and away the best method. There may be occasions when it is impractical or unethical to do so, but one should always strive for random assignment.



Studying government programs.

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- There must be a long-term follow-up. Lots of programs produce short-term effects, often just because somebody is paying attention to the people being treated. We want to know if the desired changes last.

- You must closely monitor the delivery of the new service. Many evaluations fail because the evaluators assume, wrongly, that the service was supplied in the manner intended.

Nathan recounts the results of doing this kind of research in programs with which he was connect-

ed: the experiments to find out what happens to people who receive a “negative income tax” (that is, cash payments in lieu of welfare services); the experiments in several cities to learn whether special job-training programs, called “supported work,” would help welfare mothers, drug users and ex-convicts improve their lives; the California program to change the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program from a system of welfare payments to one of job preparation. The results of these projects are hard to summarize, but in general we learned a great deal about what kinds of social policies make what kind of difference for what kinds of people, things we never would have known had these evaluations not been done.

The negative-income-tax experiment pretty much destroyed the hope, shared both by libertarians such as Milton Friedman and liberals such as James Tobin, that giving poor people money would not weaken their incentive to work. As Democratic Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York put it, “We were wrong about a guaranteed income. Seemingly, it is calamitous.”

A supported work program did in fact help welfare mothers. Supported work did not, however, help ex-addicts, ex-convicts or school dropouts.

There are many other major policy evaluations Nathan could have discussed. Criminal justice, for example, is filled with evaluations of rehabilitation programs (most don’t work), intensive motorized patrol by the police (it doesn’t cut crime), police foot patrol (it increases the public’s sense of security), the use of women as patrol officers (they do a good job) and arresting spouse assaulters (it reduces the assault rate).

If evaluative research is such a good idea, why is it so rare? One reason is cost, but other reasons are

more important. Legislators are strongly motivated to vote for programs that constituents demand. They have almost no incentive to tell constituents that they first want to find out if the programs work.

Bureaucrats have almost no incentive to evaluate their programs; getting a program started and its funding continued is so difficult that agreeing to a serious evaluation is tantamount to placing a gun in the hands of your enemy. It takes a brave administrator to support an independent evaluation of his or her program. There are such administrators, and they deserve mention on a special honor roll.

In short, hardly anybody seriously wants to know whether a policy succeeds. That Richard Nathan has been able on so many occasions to persuade reluctant people to embrace a risky strategy, all in the name of knowledge, is a remarkable achievement. ♦

## RELIGION

### A Return to Faith

SPIRITUAL POLITICS: RELIGION AND AMERICA SINCE WORLD WAR II. By Mark Silk. Simon & Schuster. 206 pp.

Reviewed by Martin E. Marty

A historian and journalist, Mark Silk begins this book grandly. He takes the reader back to the end of World War II when, after a measured decline of religious participation in the 1930s and wartime distraction, almost no one foresaw a religious surge in America. He then leaps across the decades to the present and points to the kinds of personalities and episodes that have helped take news of what he calls

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"spiritual politics" off the religion page of newspapers and move it to the front page.

In this brief book Silk, who has taught at Harvard University and now writes for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, can only begin to suggest something of the stir in American spiritual life. No one can deliver on such a promise in this narrow a compass. Yet by focusing on celebrities and intellectuals, he helps readers deduce what their followers were thinking and doing, so he indirectly fulfills his ambitious goal.

In America, as he accurately sees it, there are still plenty of people he calls "exclusivists" (who insist that only those who accept their religions can be saved) and proselytizers, but they generally play the rules of the game that Silk calls "adhesion." His point is that, in a republic, each church, no matter how exclusive, has to develop something in common with the other churches to survive; each has to adhere to the others. Silk deftly shows, for instance, how the evangelist Billy Graham for four decades has preached the exclusive call to conversion in Christ. At the same time, the public has seen Graham as a contributor to the association of religions with one another. He has wanted the born-again believers to stick together, yet by his benign manner of supporting the American way of life, Graham has provided glue for all kinds of people of goodwill who want a friendly republic.

Now and then someone really means to exclude. In the longest episode in *Spiritual Politics*, Silk overconcentrates on Leonard Feeney of Boston, a Jesuit priest who attracted a cult following in the 1940s by teaching that outside the Roman Catholic Church there is no salvation—and meaning it. He comes across in Silk's telling (and in the way the Catholic Church dealt with him) as an elitist weirdo, an abrasive force, an embarrassment. Silk magnifies this unimportant man to make an important point.

Americans, including Catholics and evangelicals, invented a "Judeo-Christian tradition," a patent on which Silk has previously written with understanding. This tradition promotes "adhesion," to which, in the postwar age of anxiety, the Protestant Graham, the Catholic Fulton J. Sheen and Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman all contributed. Meanwhile, highbrow theologians such as Will Herberg, the Jesuit John Courtney Murray, Rabbi Abraham Heschel and the Protestants Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich—there *were* giants in the earth in those days—helped the well-read to be both loyal to what was exclusive in their separate traditions and ready to contribute to interfaith spiritual politics.

Then, not long after leading Protestants organized anti-Catholic movements in the late 1940s, came the election of the Catholic John F. Kennedy as President and an ecumenical spirit associated with the Second Vatican Council. Also, the drives for racial justice and against the Vietnam War simultaneously tore America apart and united the spiritually political across boundaries of faiths.

It was precisely during the years of such contentiousness in the 1960s that the sociologist Robert Bellah gave to the American religious arrangement the name *civil religion*. It was, as Silk says, both "authentically religious and a good thing." This common faith or set of aspirations, Bellah added, could also help Americans transcend their selfishnesses and follies and promote a "world civil religion" given to justice and hope.

So easy is it to be carried along by Silk's briskly told episodes that one can forget to be critical about what he forgets to include or what he understresses. For example, he devotes only a dozen lines to the change in America's spiritual politics that is most likely to be remembered and felt decades from now—the women's movement, the changes in women's consciousness

that are so deeply altering both ideas and practices in religious groups ranging all the way from evangelicalism through Catholicism. Silk sees these changes as having "swept through all the standard-brand churches." Their sweep is wider than that and their effects are drastic and will become more so, now that the stages of early feminist militancy are long past. "The mainline denominations struggled to adjust to the revolution in their ranks," Silk says. He underestimates the changes occurring in nonmainline groups as well.

The author concludes, predictably and necessarily, with a chapter on the surprising appearance of the "new Christian Right" in the 1970s as a movement espousing an exclusive claim to salvation and bent on proselytizing. Sure enough, by the 1980s its leaders moved toward mainstream coalition politics. It has gained much of the world but, one senses here, at the expense of its old set-apart soul. It is not the first movement in America to have done so, and it is not likely to be the last.

Silk sees the dilemma of religious pluralism to be irresolvable, and his fine book gives good reason for his fellow citizens to agree. Many who read *Spiritual Politics* are likely to agree as well with the author's hint that Americans can best live somewhere between the call to exclusion and the lures of adhesion. Can anyone suggest a better deal, and then sell it to the public? It is not likely, for now. ♦





**A Roman Catholic church in Florida.**

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